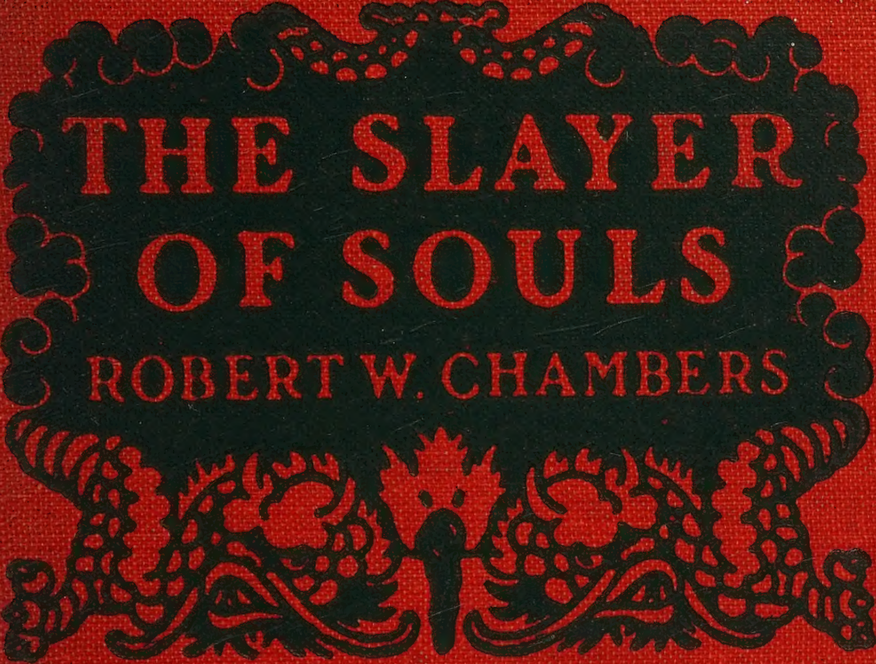
THE SLAYER OF SOULS

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS



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BY

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

AUTHOR OF "IN SECRET," "THE COMMON LAW," "THE RECKONING," "LORRAINE," ETC.

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TO
MY FRIEND
GEORGE ARMSBY

TO

GEORGE

I

Mirror of Fashion,
Admiral of Finance,
Don't, in a passion,
Denounce this poor Romance;
For, while I dare not hope it might
Enthuse you,
Perhaps it will, some rainy night,
Amuse you.

II

So, your attention,
In poetry polite,
To my invention
I bashfully invite.
Don't hurl the book at Eddie's head
Deep laden,
Or Messmore's; you might hit instead
Will Braden.

III

Kahn among Canners,
And Grand Vizier of style,
Emir of Manners,
Accept—and place on file—
This tribute, which I proffer while
I grovel,
And honor with thy matchless Smile
My novel.

R. W. C.

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CHAPTER I

THE YEZIDEE

ONLY when the *Nan-yang Maru* sailed from Yuen-San did her terrible sense of foreboding begin to subside.

For four years, waking or sleeping, the awful subconsciousness of supreme evil had never left her.

But now, as the Korean shore, receding into darkness, grew dimmer and dimmer, fear subsided and grew vague as the half-forgotten memory of horror in a dream.

She stood near the steamer's stern apart from other passengers, a slender, lonely figure in her silver-fox furs, her ulster and smart little hat, watching the lights of Yuen-San grow paler and smaller along the horizon until they looked like a level row of stars.

Under her haunted eyes Asia was slowly dissolving to a streak of vapour in the misty lustre of the moon.

Suddenly the ancient continent disappeared, washed out by a wave against the sky; and with it vanished the last shreds of that accursed nightmare which had possessed her for four endless years. But whether during those unreal years her soul had only been held in bondage, or whether, as she had been taught, it had been irrevocably destroyed, she still remained uncertain, knowing nothing about the death of souls or how it was accomplished.

As she stood there, her sad eyes fixed on the misty East, a passenger passing—an Englishwoman—paused to say something kind to the young American; and added, "if there is anything my husband and I can do it would give us much pleasure." The girl had turned her head as though not comprehending. The other woman hesitated.

"This is Doctor Norne's daughter, is it not?" she inquired in a pleasant voice.

"Yes, I am Tressa Norne. . . . I ask your pardon. . . . Thank you, madam:—I am—I seem to be—a trifle dazed——"

"What wonder, you poor child! Come to us if you feel need of companionship."

"You are very kind. . . . I seem to wish to be alone, somehow."

"I understand. . . . Good-night, my dear."

Late the next morning Tressa Norne awoke, conscious for the first time in four years that it was at last her own familiar self stretched out there on the pillows where sunshine streamed through the porthole. All that day she lay in her bamboo steamer chair on deck. Sun and wind conspired to dry every tear that wet her closed lashes. Her dark, glossy hair blew about her face; scarlet tinted her full lips again; the tense hands relaxed. Peace came at sundown.

That evening she took her Yu-kin from her cabin and found a chair on the deserted hurricane deck.

And here, in the brilliant moonlight of the China Sea, she curled up cross-legged on the deck, all alone, and sounded the four futile strings of her moon-lute, and hummed to herself, in a still voice, old songs she had sung in Yian before the tragedy. She sang the tent-song called *Tchinguiz.* She sang *Camel Bells* and *The Blue Bazaar,*—children's songs of the Yiort. She sang the ancient Khiounnou song called "The Saghalien":

I

In the month of Saffar
Among the river-reeds
I saw two horsemen
Sitting on their steeds.
Tulugum!
Heitulum!
By the river-reeds

II

In the month of Saffar
A demon guards the ford.
Tokhta, my Lover!
Draw your shining sword!
Tulugum!
Heitulum!
Slay him with your sword!

III

In the month of Saffar
Among the water-weeds
I saw two horsemen
Fighting on their steeds.
Tulugum!
Heitulum!
How my lover bleeds!

IV

In the month of Saffar,
The Year I should have wed—
The Year of The Panther—
My lover lay dead,—
Tulugum!
Heitulum!
Dead without a head.

And songs like these—the one called "Keuke Mongol," and an ancient air of the Tchortchas called "The Thirty Thousand Calamities," and some Chinese boatmen's songs which she had heard in Yian before the tragedy; these she hummed to herself there in the moonlight playing on her round-faced, short-necked lute of four strings.

Terror indeed seemed ended for her, and in her heart a great overwhelming joy was welling up which seemed to overflow across the entire moonlit world.

She had no longer any fear; no premonition of further evil. Among the few Americans and English aboard, something of her story was already known.

People were kind; and they were also considerate enough to subdue their sympathetic curiosity when they discovered that this young American girl shrank from any mention of what had happened to her during the last four years of the Great World War.

It was evident, also, that she preferred to remain aloof; and this inclination, when finally understood, was respected by her fellow passengers. The clever, efficient and polite Japanese officers and crew of the *Nan-yang Maru* were invariably considerate and courteous to her, and they remained nicely reticent, although they also knew the main outline of her story and very much desired to know more. And so, surrounded now by the friendly security of civilised humanity, Tressa Norne, reborn to light out of hell's own shadows, awoke from four years of nightmare which, after all, perhaps, never had seemed entirely actual.

And now God's real sun warmed her by day; His real moon bathed her in creamy coolness by night; sky and wind and wave thrilled her with their blessed assurance that this was once more the real world which stretched illimitably on every side from horizon to horizon; and the fair faces and pleasant voices of her own countrymen made the past seem only a ghastly dream that never again could enmesh her soul with its web of sorcery.

And now the days at sea fled very swiftly; and when at last the Golden Gate was not far away she had finally managed to persuade herself that nothing really can harm the human soul; that the monstrous devil-years were ended, never again to return; that in this vast, clean Western Continent there could be no occult threat to dread, no gigantic menace to destroy her body, no secret power that could consign her soul to the dreadful abysm of spiritual annihilation.

Very early that morning she came on deck. The November day was delightfully warm, the air clear save for a belt of mist low on the water to the southward.

She had been told that land would not be sighted for twenty-four hours, but she went forward and stood beside the starboard rail, searching the horizon with the enchanted eyes of hope.

As she stood there a Japanese ship's officer crossing the deck, forward, halted abruptly and stood staring at something to the southward.

At the same moment, above the belt of mist on the water, and perfectly clear against the blue sky above, the girl saw a fountain of gold fire rise from the fog, drift upward in the daylight, slowly assume the incandescent outline of a serpentine creature which leisurely uncoiled and hung there floating, its lizard-tail undulating, its feet with their five stumpy claws closing, relaxing, like those of a living reptile. For a full minute this amazing shape of fire floated there in the sky, brilliant in the morning light, then the reptilian form faded, died out, and the last spark vanished in the sunshine.

When the Japanese officer at last turned to resume his promenade, he noticed a white-faced girl gripping a stanchion behind him as though she were on the point of swooning. He crossed the deck quickly. Tressa Norne's eyes opened.

"Are you ill, Miss Norne?" he asked.

"The—the Dragon," she whispered.

The officer laughed. "Why, that was nothing but Chinese day-fireworks," he explained. "The crew of some fishing boat yonder in the fog is amusing itself." He looked at her narrowly, then with a nice little bow and smile he offered his arm: "If you are indisposed, perhaps you might wish to go below to your stateroom, Miss Norne?"

She thanked him, managed to pull herself together and force a ghost of a smile.

He lingered a moment, said something cheerful about being nearly home, then made her a punctilious salute and went his way.

Tressa Norne leaned back against the stanchion and closed her eyes. Her pallor became deathly. She bent over and laid her white face in her folded arms.

After a while she lifted her head, and, turning very slowly, stared at the fog-belt out of frightened eyes.

And saw, rising out of the fog, a pearl-tinted sphere which gradually mounted into the clear daylight above like the full moon's phantom in the sky.

Higher, higher rose the spectral moon until at last it swam in the very zenith. Then it slowly evaporated in the blue vault above.

A great wave of despair swept her; she clung to the stanchion, staring with half-blinded eyes at the flat fog-bank in the south.

But no more "Chinese day-fireworks" rose out of it. And at length she summoned sufficient strength to go below to her cabin and lie there, half senseless, huddled on her bed.

When land was sighted, the following morning, Tressa Norne had lived a century in twenty-four hours. And in that space of time her agonised soul had touched all depths.

But now as the Golden Gate loomed up in the morning light, rage, terror, despair had burned themselves out. From their ashes within her mind arose the cool wrath of desperation armed for anything, wary, alert, passionately determined to survive at whatever cost, recklessly ready to fight for bodily existence.

That was her sole instinct now, to go on living, to survive, no matter at what price. And if it were indeed true that her soul had been slain, she defied its murderers to slay her body also.

That night, at her hotel in San Francisco, she double-locked her door and lay down without undressing, leaving all lights burning and an automatic pistol underneath her pillow.

Toward morning she fell asleep, slept for an hour, started up in awful fear. And saw the double-locked door opposite the foot of her bed slowly opening of its own accord.

Into the brightly illuminated room stepped a graceful young man in full evening dress carrying over his left arm an overcoat, and in his other hand a top hat and silver tipped walking-stick.

With one bound the girl swung herself from the bed to the carpet and clutched at the pistol under her pillow.

"Sanang!" she cried in a terrible voice.

"Keuke Mongol!" he said, smilingly.

For a moment they confronted each other in the brightly lighted bedroom, then, partly turning, he cast a calm glance at the open door behind him; and, as though moved by a wind, the door slowly closed. And she heard the key turn of itself in the lock, and saw the bolt slide smoothly into place again.

Her power of speech came back to her presently—only a broken whisper at first: "Do you think I am afraid of your accursed magic?" she managed to gasp. "Do you think I am afraid of you, Sanang?"

"You are afraid," he said serenely.

"You lie!"

"No, I do not lie. To one another the Yezidees never lie."

"You lie again, assassin! I am no Yezidee!"

He smiled gently. His features were pleasing, smooth, and regular; his cheek-bones high, his skin fine and of a pale and delicate ivory colour. Once his black, beautifully shaped eyes wandered to the levelled pistol which she now held clutched desperately close to her right hip, and a slightly ironical expression veiled his gaze for an instant.

"Bullets?" he murmured. "But you and I are of the Hassanis."

"The third lie, Sanang!" Her voice had regained its strength. Tense, alert, blue eyes ablaze, every faculty concentrated on the terrible business before her, the girl now seemed like some supple leopardess poised on the swift verge of murder.

"Tokhta!"* She spat the word. "Any movement toward a hidden weapon, any gesture suggesting recourse to magic—and I kill you, Sanang, exactly where you stand!"

"With a pistol?" He laughed. Then his smooth features altered subtly. He said: "Keuke Mongol, who call yourself Tressa Norne,—Keuke—heavenly azure-blue,—named so in the temple because of the colour of your eyes—listen attentively, for this is the Yarlig which I bring to you by word of mouth from Yian, as from Yezidee to Yezidee:

"Here, in this land called the United States of America, the Temple girl, Keuke Mongol, who has witnessed the mysteries of Erlik and who understands the magic of the Sheiks-el-Djebel, and who has seen Mount Alamout and the eight castles and the fifty thousand Hassanis in white turbans and in robes of white;—*you*—Azure-blue eyes—heed the Yarlig!—or may thirty thousand calamities overtake you!"

---

* "Look out!" Nomad-Mongol dialect.

There was a dead silence; then he went on seriously: "It is decreed: You shall cease to remember that you are a Yezidee, that you are of the Hassanis, that you ever have laid eyes on Yian the Beautiful, that you ever set naked foot upon Mount Alamout. It is decreed that you remember nothing of what you have seen and heard, of what has been told and taught during the last four years reckoned as the Christians reckon from our Year of the Bull. Otherwise—my Master sends you this for your—*convenience*."

Leisurely, from under his folded overcoat, the young man produced a roll of white cloth and dropped it at her feet and the girl shrank aside, shuddering, knowing that the roll of white cloth was meant for her winding-sheet.

Then the colour came back to lip and cheek; and, glancing up from the soft white shroud, she smiled at the young man: "Have you ended your Oriental mummery?" she asked calmly. "Listen very seriously in your turn, Sanang, Sheik-el-Djebel, Prince of the Hassanis who, God knows when and how, have come out into the sunshine of this clean and decent country, out of a filthy darkness where devils and sorcerers make earth a hell.

"If you, or yours, threaten me, annoy me, interfere with me, I shall go to our civilised police and tell all I know concerning the Yezidees. I mean to live. Do you understand? You know what you have done to me and mine. I come back to my own country alone, without any living kin, poor, home-less, friendless,—and, perhaps, damned. I intend, nevertheless, to survive. I shall not relax my clutch on bodily existence whatever the Yezidees may pretend to have done to my soul. I am determined to live in the body, anyway."

He nodded gravely.

She said: "Out at sea, over the fog, I saw the sign of Yu-lao in fire floating in the day-sky. I saw his spectral moon rise and vanish in mid-heaven. I understood. But——" And here she suddenly showed an edge of teeth under the full scarlet upper lip: "Keep your signs and your shrouds to yourself, dog of a Yezidee!—toad!—tortoise-egg!—he-goat with three legs! Keep your threats and your messages to yourself! Keep your accursed magic to yourself! Do you think to frighten me with your sorcery by showing me the Moons of Yu-lao?—by opening a bolted door? I know more of such magic than do you, Sanang—Death Adder of Alamout!"

Suddenly she laughed aloud at him—laughed insultingly in his expressionless face:

"I saw you and Gutchlug Khan and your cowardly Tchortchas in red-lacquered jackets slink out of the Temple of Erlik where the bronze gong thundered and a cloud settled down raining little yellow snakes all over the marble steps—all over you, Prince Sanang! You were *afraid,* my Tougtchi!—you and Gutchlug and your red Tchortchas with their halberds all dripping with human entrails! And I saw you mount and gallop off into the woods while in the depths of the magic cloud which rained little yellow snakes all around you, we temple girls laughed and mocked at you—at you and your cowardly Tchortcha horsemen."

A slight tinge of pink came into the young man's pale face. Tressa Norne stepped nearer, her levelled pistol resting on her hip.

"Why did you not complain of us to your Master, the Old Man of the Mountain?" she asked jeeringly. "And where, also, was your Yezidee magic when it rained little snakes?—What frightened you away—who had boldly come to seize a temple girl—you who had screwed up your courage sufficiently to defy Erlik in his very shrine and snatch from his temple a young thing whose naked body wrapped in gold was worth the chance of death to you?"

The young man's top-hat dropped to the floor. He bent over to pick it up. His face was quite expressionless, quite colourless, now.

"I went on no such errand," he said with an effort. "I went with a thousand prayers on scarlet paper made in——"

"A lie, Yezidee! You came to seize *me!*"

He turned still paler. "By Abu, Omar, Otman, and Ali, it is not true!"

"You lie!—by the Lion of God, Hassini!"

She stepped closer. "And I'll tell you another thing you fear—you Yezidee of Alamout—you robber of Yian—you sorcerer of Sabbah Khan, and chief of his sect of Assassins! You fear this native land of mine, America; and its laws and customs, and its clear, clean sunshine; and its cities and people; and its police! Take that message back. We Americans fear nobody save the true God!—nobody—neither Yezidee nor Hassani nor Russ nor German nor that sexless monster born of hell and called the Bolshevik!"

"Tokhta!" he cried sharply.

"Damn you!" retorted the girl; "get out of my room! Get out of my sight! Get out of my path! Get out of my life! Take that to your Master of Mount Alamout! I do what I please; I go where I please; I live as I please. And if I please, *I turn against him!*"

"In that event," he said hoarsely, "there lies your winding-sheet on the floor at your feet! Take up your shroud; and make Erlik seize you!"

"Sanang," she said very seriously.

"I hear you, Keuke-Mongol."

"Listen attentively. I wish to live. I have had enough of death in life. I desire to remain a living, breathing thing—even if it be true—as you Yezidees tell me, that you have caught my soul in a net and that your sorcerers really control its destiny.

"But damned or not, I passionately desire to live. And I am coward enough to hold my peace for the sake of living. So—I remain silent. I have no stomach to defy the Yezidees; because, if I do, sooner or later I shall be killed. I know it. I have no desire to die for others—to perish for the sake of the common good. I am young. I have suffered too much; I am determined to live—and let my soul take its chances between God and Erlik."

She came close to him, looked curiously into his pale face.

"I laughed at you out of the temple cloud," she said. "I know how to open bolted doors as well as you do. And I know *other things*. And if you ever again come to me in this life I shall first torture you, then slay you. Then I shall tell all! . . . and unroll my shroud."

"I keep your word of promise until you break it," he interrupted hastily. "Yarlig! It is decreed!" And then he slowly turned as though to glance over his shoulder at the locked and bolted door.

"Permit me to open it for you, Prince Sanang," said the girl scornfully. And she gazed steadily at the door.

Presently, all by itself, the key turned in the lock, the bolt slid back, the door gently opened.

Toward it, white as a corpse, his overcoat on his left arm, his stick and top-hat in the other hand, crept the young man in his faultless evening garb.

Then, as he reached the threshold, he suddenly sprang aside. A small yellow snake lay coiled there on the door sill. For a full throbbing minute the young man stared at the yellow reptile in unfeigned horror. Then, very cautiously, he moved his fascinated eyes sideways and gazed in silence at Tressa Norne.

The girl laughed.

"Sorceress!" he burst out hoarsely. "Take that accursed thing from my path!"

"What thing, Sanang?" At that his dark, frightened eyes stole toward the threshold again, seeking the little snake. But there was no snake there. And when he was certain of this he went, twitching and trembling all over.

Behind him the door closed softly, locking and bolting itself.

And behind the bolted door in the brightly lighted bedroom Tressa Norne fell on both knees, her pistol still clutched in her right hand, calling passionately upon Christ to forgive her for the dreadful ability she had dared to use, and begging Him to save her body from death and her soul from the snare of the Yezidee.

CHAPTER II

THE YELLOW SNAKE

WHEN the young man named Sanang left the bed-chamber of Tressa Norne he turned to the right in the carpeted corridor outside and hurried toward the hotel elevator. But he did not ring for the lift; instead he took the spiral iron stairway which circled it, and mounted hastily to the floor above.

Here was his own apartment and he entered it with a key bearing the hotel tag. A dusky-skinned powerful old man wearing a grizzled beard and a greasy broadcloth coat of old-fashioned cut known to provincials as a "Prince Albert" looked up from where he was seated cross-legged upon the sofa, sharpening a curved knife on a whetstone.

"Gutchlug," stammered Sanang, "I am afraid of her! What happened two years ago at the temple happened again a moment since, there in her very bedroom! She made a yellow death-adder out of nothing and placed it upon the threshold, and mocked me with laughter. May Thirty Thousand Calamities overtake her! May Erlik seize her! May her eyes rot out and her limbs fester! May the seven score and three principal devils——"

"You chatter like a temple ape," said Gutchlug tranquilly. "Does Keuke Mongol die or live? That alone interests me."

"Gutchlug," faltered the young man, "thou knowest that m-my heart is inclined to mercy toward this young Yezidee——"

"I know that it is inclined to lust," said the other bluntly.

Sanang's pale face flamed.

"Listen," he said. "If I had not loved her better than life had I dared go that day to the temple to take her for my own?"

"You loved life better," said Gutchlug. "You fled when it rained snakes on the temple steps—you and your Tchortcha horsemen! Kai! I also ran. But I gave every soldier thirty blows with a stick before I slept that night. And you should have had your thirty, also, conforming to the Yarlig, my Tougtchi."

Sanang, still holding his hat and cane and carrying his overcoat over his left arm, looked down at the heavy, brutal features of Gutchlug Khan—at the cruel mouth with its crooked smile under the grizzled beard; at the huge hands—the powerful hands of a murderer—now deftly honing to a razor-edge the Kalmuck knife held so firmly yet lightly in his great blunt fingers.

"Listen attentively, Prince Sanang," growled Gutchlug, pausing in his monotonous task to test the blade's edge on his thumb—"Does the Yezidee Keuke Mongol live? Yes or no?"

Sanang hesitated, moistened his pallid lips. "She dares not betray us."

"By what pledge?"

"Fear."

"That is no pledge. You also were afraid, yet you went to the temple!"

"She has listened to the Yarlig. She has looked upon her shroud. She has admitted that she desires to live. Therein lies her pledge to us."

"And she placed a yellow snake at your feet!" sneered Gutchlug. "Prince Sanang, tell me, what man or what devil in all the chronicles of the past has ever tamed a Snow-Leopard?" And he continued to hone his yataghan.

"Gutchlug——"

"No, she dies," said the other tranquilly.

"Not yet!"

"When, then?"

"Gutchlug, thou knowest me. Hear my pledge! At her first gesture toward treachery—her first thought of betrayal—I myself will end it all."

"You promise to slay this young snow-leopardess?"

"By the four companions, I swear to kill her with my own hands!"

Gutchlug sneered. "Kill her—yes—with the kiss that has burned thy lips to ashes for all these months.

I know thee, Sanang. Leave her to me. Dead she will no longer trouble thee."

"Gutchlug!"

"I hear, Prince Sanang."

"Strike when I nod. Not until then."

"I hear, Tougtchi. I understand thee, my Banneret. I whet my knife. Kai!"

Sanang looked at him, put on his top-hat and overcoat, pulled on a pair of white evening gloves.

"I go forth," he said more pleasantly.

"I remain here to talk to my seven ancestors and sharpen my knife," remarked Gutchlug.

"When the white world and the yellow world and the brown world and the black world finally fall before the Hassanis," said Sanang with a quick smile, "I shall bring thee to her. Gutchlug—once—before she is veiled, thou shalt behold what is lovelier than Eve."

The other stolidly whetted his knife.

Sanang pulled out a gold cigarette case, lighted a cigarette with an air.

"I go among Germans," he volunteered amiably. "The huns swam across two oceans, but, like the unclean swine, it is their own throats they cut when they swim! Well, there is only one God. And not very many angels. Erlik is greater. And there are many million devils to do his bidding. Adieu. There is rice and there is koumiss in the frozen closet. When I return you shall have been asleep for hours."

When Sanang left the hotel one of two young men seated in the hotel lobby got up and strolled out after him.

A few minutes later the other man went to the elevator, ascended to the fourth floor, and entered an apartment next to the one occupied by Sanang.

There was another man there, lying on the lounge and smoking a cigar. Without a word, they both went leisurely about the matter of disrobing for the night.

When the shorter man who had been in the apartment when the other entered, and who was dark and curly-headed, had attired himself in pyjamas, he sat down on one of the twin beds to enjoy his cigar to the bitter end.

"Has Sanang gone out?" he inquired in a low voice.

"Yes. Benton went after him."

The other man nodded. "Cleves," he said, "I guess it looks as though this Norne girl is in it, too."

"What happened?"

"As soon as she arrived, Sanang made straight for her apartment. He remained inside for half an hour. Then he came out in a hurry and went to his own rooms, where that surly servant of his squats all day, shining up his arsenal, and drinking koumiss."

"Did you get their conversation?"

"I've got a record of the gibberish. It requires an interpreter, of course."

"I suppose so. I'll take the records east with me to-morrow, and by the same token I'd better notify New York that I'm leaving."

He went, half-undressed, to the telephone, got the telegraph office, and sent the following message:

"Recklow, *New York:*

"Leaving to-morrow for N. Y. with samples. Retain expert in Oriental fabrics.

"Victor Cleves."

"Report for me, too," said the dark young man, who was still enjoying his cigar on his pillows.

So Cleves sent another telegram, directed also to

"Recklow, *New York:*

"Benton and I are watching the market. Chinese importations fluctuate. Recent consignment per *Nanyang Maru* will be carefully inspected and details forwarded.

"Alek Selden."

In the next room Gutchlug could hear the voice of Cleves at the telephone, but he merely shrugged his heavy shoulders in contempt. For he had other things to do beside eavesdropping.

Also, for the last hour—in fact, ever since Sanang's departure—something had been happening to him—something that happens to a Hassani only once in a lifetime. And now this unique thing had happened to him—to him, Gutchlug Khan—to him before whose Khiounnou ancestors eighty-one thousand nations had bowed the knee.

It had come to him at last, this dread thing, unheralded, totally unexpected, a few minutes after Sanang had departed.

And he suddenly knew he was going to die.

And, when, presently, he comprehended it, he bent his grizzled head and listened seriously. And, after a little silence, he heard his soul bidding him farewell.

So the chatter of white men at a telephone in the next apartment had no longer any significance for him. Whether or not they had been spying on him; whether they were plotting, made no difference to him now.

He tested his knife's edge with his thumb and listened gravely to his soul bidding him farewell.

But, for a Yezidee, there was still a little detail to attend to before his soul departed;—two matters to regulate. One was to select his shroud. The other was to cut the white throat of this young snow-leopardess called Keuke Mongol, the Yezidee temple girl.

And he could steal down to her bedroom and finish that matter in five minutes.

But first he must choose his shroud, as is the custom of the Yezidee.

That office, however, was quickly accomplished in a country where fine white sheets of linen are to be found on every hotel bed.

So, on his way to the door, his naked knife in his right hand, he paused to fumble under the bedcovers and draw out a white linen sheet.

Something hurt his hand like a needle. He moved it, felt the thing squirm under his fingers and pierce his palm again and again. With a shriek, he tore the bedclothes from the bed.

A little yellow snake lay coiled there.

He got as far as the telephone, but could not use it. And there he fell heavily, shaking the room and dragging the instrument down with him.

There was some excitement. Cleves and Selden in their bathrobes went in to look at the body. The hotel physician diagnosed it as heart-trouble. Or, possibly, poison. Some gazed significantly at the naked knife still clutched in the dead man's hands.

Around the wrist of the other hand was twisted a pliable gold bracelet representing a little snake. It had real emeralds for eyes.

It had not been there when Gutchlug died.

But nobody except Sanang could know that. And later when Sanang came back and found Gutchlug very dead on the bed and a policeman sitting outside, he offered no information concerning the new bracelet shaped like a snake with real emeralds for eyes, which adorned the dead man's left wrist.

Toward evening, however, after an autopsy had confirmed the house physician's diagnosis that heart-disease had finished Gutchlug, Sanang mustered enough courage to go to the desk in the lobby and send up his card to Miss Norne.

It appeared, however, that Miss Norne had left for Chicago about noon.

CHAPTER III

GREY MAGIC

TO Victor Cleves came the following telegram in code:

"Washington,

"April 14th, 1919.

"Investigation ordered by the State Department as the result of frequent mention in despatches of Chinese troops operating with the Russian Bolsheviki forces has disclosed that the Bolsheviki are actually raising a Chinese division of 30,000 men recruited in Central Asia. This division has been guilty of the greatest cruelties. A strange rumour prevails among the Allied forces at Archangel that this Chinese division is led by Yezidee and Hassani officers belonging to the sect of devil-worshipers and that they employ black arts and magic in battle.

"From information so far gathered by the several branches of the United States Secret Service operating throughout the world, it appears possible that the various revolutionary forces of disorder, in Europe and Asia, which now are violently threatening the peace and security, of all established civilisation on earth, may have had a common origin. This origin, it is now suspected, may date back to a very remote epoch; the wide-spread forces of violence and merciless destruction may have had their begin-

ning among some ancient and predatory race whose existence was maintained solely by robbery and murder.

"Anarchists, terrorists, Bolshevists, Reds of all shades and degrees, are now believed to represent in modern times what perhaps once was a tribe of Assassins—a sect whose religion was founded upon a common predilection for crimes of violence.

"On this theory then, for the present, the United States Government will proceed with this investigation of Bolshevism; and the Secret Service will continue to pay particular attention to all Orientals in the United States and other countries. You personally are formally instructed to keep in touch with XLY-371 (Alek Selden) and ZB-303 (James Benton), and to employ every possible means to become friendly with the girl Tressa Norne, win her confidence, and, if possible, enlist her actively in the Government Service as your particular aid and comrade.

"It is equally important that the movements of the Oriental, called Sanang, be carefully observed in order to discover the identity and whereabouts of his companions. However, until further instructions he is not to be taken into custody. M. H. 2479.

"(Signed)

"(John Recklow.)"

The long despatch from John Recklow made Cleves's duty plain enough.

For months, now, Selden and Benton had been watching Tressa Norne. And they had learned practically nothing about her.

And now the girl had come within Cleves's sphere of operation. She had been in New York for two weeks. Telegrams from Benton in Chicago, and from Selden in Buffalo, had prepared him for her arrival.

He had his men watching her boarding-house on West Twenty-eighth Street, men to follow her, men to keep their eyes on her at the theatre, where every evening, at 10:45, her *entr'acte* was staged. He knew where to get her. But he, himself, had been on the watch for the man Sanang; and had failed to find the slightest trace of him in New York, although warned that he had arrived.

So, for that evening, he left the hunt for Sanang to others, put on his evening clothes, and dined with fashionable friends at the Patroons' Club, who never for an instant suspected that young Victor Cleves was in the Service of the United States Government. About half-past nine he strolled around to the theatre, desiring to miss as much as possible of the popular show without being too late to see the curious little *entr'acte* in which this girl, Tressa Norne, appeared alone.

He had secured an aisle seat near the stage at an outrageous price; the main show was still thundering and fizzing and glittering as he entered the theatre; so he stood in the rear behind the orchestra until the descending curtain extinguished the outrageous glare and din.

Then he went down the aisle, and as he seated himself Tressa Norne stepped from the wings and stood before the lowered curtain facing an expectant but oddly undemonstrative audience.

The girl worked rapidly, seriously, and in silence. She seemed a mere child there behind the footlights, not more than sixteen anyway—her winsome eyes and wistful lips unspoiled by the world's wisdom.

Yet once or twice the mouth drooped for a second and the winning eyes darkened to a remoter blue—the brooding iris hue of far horizons.

She wore the characteristic tabard of stiff golden tissue and the gold pagoda-shaped headpiece of a Yezidee temple girl. Her flat, slipper-shaped footgear was of stiff gold, too, and curled upward at the toes.

All this accentuated her apparent youth. For in face and throat no firmer contours had as yet modified the soft fullness of immaturity; her limbs were boyish and frail, and her bosom more undecided still, so that the embroidered breadth of gold fell flat and straight from her chest to a few inches above the ankles.

She seemed to have no stock of paraphernalia with which to aid the performance; no assistant, no orchestral diversion, nor did she serve herself with any magician's patter. She did her work close to the footlights.

Behind her loomed a black curtain; the strip of stage in front was bare even of carpet; the orchestra remained mute.

But when she needed anything—a little table, for example—well, it was suddenly there where she required it—a tripod, for instance, evidently fitted to hold the big iridescent bubble of glass in which swarmed little tropical fishes—and which arrived neatly from nowhere. She merely placed her hands before her as though ready to support something weighty which she expected and—suddenly, the huge crystal bubble was visible, resting between her hands. And when she tired of holding it, she set it upon the empty air and let go of it; and instead of crashing to the stage with its finny rainbow swarm of swimmers, out of thin air appeared a tripod to support it.

Applause followed, not very enthusiastic, for the sort of audience which sustains the shows of which her performance was merely an *entr'acte* is an audience responsive only to the obvious.

Nobody ever before had seen that sort of magic in America. People scarcely knew whether or not they quite liked it. The lightning of innovation stupefies the dull; ignorance is always suspicious of innovation—always afraid to put itself on record until its mind is made up by somebody else.

So in this typical New York audience approbation was cautious, but every fascinated eye remained focused on this young girl who continued to do incredible things, which seemed to resemble "putting something over" on them; a thing which no uneducated American conglomeration ever quite forgives.

The girl's silence, too, perplexed them; they were accustomed to gabble, to noise, to jazz, vocal and instrumental, to that incessant metropolitan clamour which fills every second with sound in a city whose only distinction is its din. Stage, press, art, letters, social existence unless noisy mean nothing in Gotham; reticence, leisure, repose are the three lost arts. The megaphone is the city's symbol; its chiefest crime, silence.

The girl having finished with the big glass bubble full of tiny fish, picked it up and tossed it aside. For a moment it apparently floated there in space like a soap-bubble. Changing rainbow tints waxed and waned on the surface, growing deeper and more gorgeous until the floating globe glowed scarlet, then suddenly burst into flame and vanished. And only a strange, sweet perfume lingered in the air.

But she gave her perplexed audience no time to wonder; she had seated herself on the stage and was already swiftly busy unfolding a white veil with which she presently covered herself, draping it over her like a tent.

The veil seemed to be translucent; she was apparently visible seated beneath it. But the veil turned into smoke, rising into the air in a thin white cloud; and there, where she had been seated, was a statue of white stone the image of herself!—in all the frail springtide of early adolescence—a white statue, cold, opaque, exquisite in its sculptured immobility.

There came, the next moment, a sound of distant thunder; flashes lighted the blank curtain; and suddenly a vein of lightning and a sharper peal shattered the statue to fragments.

There they lay, broken bits of her own sculptured body, glistening in a heap behind the footlights. Then each fragment began to shimmer with a rosy internal light of its own, until the pile of broken marble glowed like living coals under thickening and reddening vapours. And, presently, dimly perceptible, there she was in the flesh again, seated in the fiery centre of the conflagration, stretching her arms luxuriously, yawning, seemingly awakening from refreshing slumber, her eyes unclosing to rest with a sort of confused apology upon her astounded audience.

As she rose to her feet nothing except herself remained on the stage—no débris, not a shred of smoke, not a spark.

She came down, then, across an inclined plank into the orchestra among the audience.

In the aisle seat nearest her sat Victor Cleves. His business was to be there that evening. But she didn't know that, knew nothing about him—had never before set eyes on him.

At her gesture of invitation he made a cup of both his hands. Into these she poured a double handful of unset diamonds—or what appeared to be diamonds—pressed her own hands above his for a second—and the diamonds in his palms had become pearls.

These were passed around to people in the vicinity, and finally returned to Mr. Cleves, who, at her request, covered the heap of pearls with both his hands, hiding them entirely from view.

At her nod he uncovered them. The pearls had become emeralds. Again, while he held them, and without even touching him, she changed them into rubies. Then she turned away from him, apparently forgetting that he still held the gems, and he sat very still, one cupped hand over the other, while she poured silver coins into a woman's gloved hands, turned them into gold coins, then flung each coin into the air, where it changed to a living, fragrant rose and fell among the audience.

Presently she seemed to remember Cleves, came back down the aisle, and under his close and intent gaze drew from his cupped hands, one by one, a score of brilliant little living birds, which continually flew about her and finally perched, twittering, on her golden headdress—a rainbow-crest of living jewels.

As she drew the last warm, breathing little feathered miracle from Cleves's hands and released it, he said rapidly under his breath: "I want a word with you later. Where?"

She let her clear eyes rest on him for a moment, then with a shrug so slight that it was perceptible, perhaps, only to him, she moved on along the inclined way, stepped daintily over the footlights, caught fire, apparently, nodded to a badly rattled audience, and sauntered off, burning from head to foot.

What applause there was became merged in a dissonant instrumental outburst from the orchestra; the great god Jazz resumed direction, the mindless audience breathed freely again as the curtain rose upon a familiar, yelling turbulence, including all that Gotham really understands and cares for—legs and noise.

Victor Cleves glanced up at the stage, then continued to study the name of the girl on the programme. It was featured in rather pathetic solitude under *"Entr'acte."* And he read further: "During the *entr'acte* Miss Tressa Norne will entertain you with several phases of Black Magic. This strange knowledge was acquired by Miss Norne from the Yezidees, among which almost unknown people still remain descendants of that notorious and formidable historic personage known in the twelfth century as The Old Man of the Mountain—or The Old Man of Mount Alamout.

"The pleasant profession of this historic individual was assassination; and some historians now believe that genuine occult power played a part in his dreadful record—a record which terminated only when the infantry of Genghis Khan took Mount Alamout by storm and hanged the Old Man of the Mountain and burned his body under a boulder of You-Stone.

"For Miss Norne's performance there appears to be no plausible, practical or scientific explanation.

"During her performance the curtain will remain lowered for fifteen minutes and will then rise on the last act of 'You Betcha Life.' "

The noisy show continued while Cleves, paying it scant attention, brooded over the programme. And ever his keen, grey eyes reverted to her name, Tressa Norne.

Then, for a little while, he settled back and let his absent gaze wander over the galloping battalions of painted girls and the slapstick principals whose perpetual motion evoked screams of approbation from the audience amid the din of the great god Jazz.

He had an aisle seat; he disturbed nobody when he went out and around to the stage door.

The aged man on duty took his card, called a boy and sent it off. The boy returned with the card, saying that Miss Norne had already dressed and departed.

Cleves tipped him and then tipped the doorman heavily.

"Where does she live?" he asked.

"Say," said the old man, "I dunno, and that's straight. But them ladies mostly goes up to the roof for a look in at the 'Moonlight Masque' and a dance afterward. Was you ever up there?"

"Yes."

"Seen the new show?"

"No."

"Well, g'wan up while you can get a table. And I bet the little girl will be somewheres around."

"The little girl" *was* "somewheres around." He secured a table, turned and looked about at the vast cabaret into which only a few people had yet filtered, and saw her at a distance in the carpeted corridor buying violets from one of the flower-girls.

A waiter placed a reserve card on his table; he continued on around the outer edge of the auditorium.

Miss Norne had already seated herself at a small table in the rear, and a waiter was serving her with iced orange juice and little French cakes.

When the waiter returned Cleves went up and took off his hat.

"May I talk with you for a moment, Miss Norne?" he said.

The girl looked up, the wheat-straw still between her scarlet lips. Then, apparently recognising in him the young man in the audience who had spoken to her, she resumed her business of imbibing orange juice.

The girl seemed even frailer and younger in her hat and street gown. A silver-fox stole hung from her shoulders; a gold bag lay on the table under the bunch of violets.

She paid no attention whatever to him. Presently her wheat-straw buckled, and she selected a better one.

He said: "There's something rather serious I'd like to speak to you about if you'll let me. I'm not the sort you evidently suppose. I'm not trying to annoy you."

At that she looked around and upward once more.

Very, very young, but already spoiled, he thought, for the dark-blue eyes were coolly appraising him, and the droop of the mouth had become almost sullen. Besides, traces of paint still remained to incarnadine lip and cheek and there was a hint of hardness in the youthful plumpness of the features.

"Are you a professional?" she asked without curiosity.

"A theatrical man? No."

"Then if you haven't anything to offer me, what is it you wish?"

"I have a job to offer if you care for it and if you are up to it," he said.

Her eyes became slightly hostile:

"What kind of job do you mean?"

"I want to learn something about you first. Will you come over to my table and talk it over?"

"No."

"What sort do you suppose me to be?" he inquired, amused.

"The usual sort, I suppose."

"You mean a Johnny?"

"Yes—of sorts."

She let her insolent eyes sweep him once more, from head to foot.

He was a well-built young man and in his evening dress he had that something about him which placed him very definitely where he really belonged.

"Would you mind looking at my card?" he asked.

He drew it out and laid it beside her, and without stirring she scanned it sideways.

"That's my name and address," he continued. "I'm not contemplating mischief. I've enough excitement in life without seeking adventure. Besides, I'm not the sort who goes about annoying women."

She glanced up at him again:

"You are annoying me!"

"I'm sorry. I was quite honest. Good-night."

He took his *congé* with unhurried amiability; had already turned away when she said:

"Please . . . what do you desire to say to me?" He came back to her table:

"I couldn't tell you until I know a little more about you."

"What—do you wish to know?"

"Several things. I could scarcely ask you—go over such matters with you—standing here."

There was a pause; the girl juggled with the straw on the table for a few moments, then, partly turning, she summoned a waiter, paid him, adjusted her stole, picked up her gold bag and her violets and stood up. Then she turned to Cleves and gave him a direct look, which had in it the impersonal and searching gaze of a child.

When they were seated at the table reserved for him the place already was filling rapidly—backwash from the theatres slopped through every aisle—people not yet surfeited with noise, not yet sufficiently sodden by their worship of the great god Jazz.

"Jazz," said Cleves, glancing across his dinner-card at Tressa Norne—"what's the meaning of the word? Do you happen to know?"

"Doesn't it come from the French *'jaser'?*"

He smiled. "Possibly. I'm rather hungry. Are you?"

"Yes."

"Will you indicate your preferences?"

She studied her card, and presently he gave the order.

"I'd like some champagne," she said, "unless you think it's too expensive."

He smiled at that, too, and gave the order.

"I didn't suggest any wine because you seem so young," he said.

"How old do I seem?"

"Sixteen perhaps."

"I am twenty-one."

"Then you've had no troubles."

"I don't know what you call trouble," she remarked, indifferently, watching the arriving throngs.

The orchestra, too, had taken its place.

"Well," she said, "now that you've picked me up, what do you really want of me?" There was no mitigating smile to soften what she said. She dropped her elbows on the table, rested her chin between her palms and looked at him with the same searching, undisturbed expression that is so disconcerting in children. As he made no reply: "May I have a cocktail?" she inquired.

He gave the order. And his mind registered pessimism. "There is nothing doing with this girl," he thought. "She's already on the toboggan." But he said aloud: "That was beautiful work you did down in the theatre, Miss Norne."

"Did you think so?"

"Of course. It was astounding work."

"Thank you. But managers and audiences differ with you."

"Then they are very stupid," he said.

"Possibly. But that does not help me pay my board."

"Do you mean you have trouble in securing theatrical engagements?"

"Yes, I am through here to-night, and there's nothing else in view, so far."

"That's incredible!" he exclaimed.

She lifted her glass, slowly drained it.

For a few moments she caressed the stem of the empty glass, her gaze remote.

"Yes, it's that way," she said. "From the beginning I felt that my audiences were not in sympathy with me. Sometimes it even amounts to hostility. Americans do not like what I do, even if it holds their attention. I don't quite understand why they don't like it, but I'm always conscious they don't. And of course that settles it—to-night has settled the whole thing, once and for all."

"What are you going to do?"

"What others do, I presume."

"What do others do?" he inquired, watching the lovely sullen eyes.

"Oh, they do what I'm doing now, don't they?—

let some man pick them up and feed them." She lifted her indifferent eyes. "I'm not criticising you. I meant to do it some day—when I had courage. That's why I just asked you if I might have some champagne—finding myself a little scared at my first step. . . . But you *did* say you might have a job for me. Didn't you?"

"Suppose I haven't. What are you going to do?"

The curtain was rising. She nodded toward the bespangled chorus. "Probably that sort of thing. They've asked me."

Supper was served. They both were hungry and thirsty; the music made conversation difficult, so they supped in silence and watched the imbecile show conceived by vulgarians, produced by vulgarians and served up to mental degenerates of the same species—the average metropolitan audience.

For ten minutes a pair of comedians fell up and down a flight of steps, and the audience shrieked approval.

"Miss Norne?"

The girl who had been watching the show turned in her chair and looked back at him.

"Your magic is by far the most wonderful I have ever seen or heard of. Even in India such things are not done."

"No, not in India," she said, indifferently.

"Where then?"

"In China."

"You learned to do such things there?"

"Yes."

"Where, in China, did you learn such amazing magic?"

"In Yian."

"I never heard of it. Is it a province?"

"A city."

"And you lived there?"

"Fourteen years."

"When?"

"From 1904 to 1918."

"During the great war," he remarked, "you were in China?"

"Yes."

"Then you arrived here very recently."

"In November, from the Coast."

"I see. You played the theatres from the Coast eastward."

"And went to pieces in New York," she added calmly, finishing her glass of champagne.

"Have you any family?" he asked.

"No."

"Do you care to say anything further?" he inquired, pleasantly.

"About my family? Yes, if you wish. My father was in the spice trade in Yian. The Yezidees took Yian in 1910, threw him into a well in his own compound and filled it up with dead imperial troops. I was thirteen years old. . . . The Hassani did that. They held Yian nearly eight years, and I lived with my mother, in a garden pagoda, until 1914. In

January of that year Germans got through from Kiaou-Chou. They had been six months on the way. I think they were Hassanis. Anyway, they persuaded the Hassanis to massacre every English-speaking prisoner. And so—my mother died in the garden pagoda of Yian. . . . I was not told for four years."

"Why did they spare you?" he asked, astonished at her story so quietly told, so utterly destitute of emotion.

"I was seventeen. A certain person had placed me among the temple girls in the temple of Erlik. It pleased this person to make of me a Mongol temple girl as a mockery at Christ. They gave me the name Keuke Mongol. I asked to serve the shrine of Kwann-an—she being like to our Madonna. But this person gave me the choice between the halberds of the Tchortchas and the sorcery of Erlik."

She lifted her sombre eyes. "So I learned how to do the things you saw. But—what I did there on the stage is not—respectable."

An odd shiver passed over him. For a second he took her literally, suddenly convinced that her magic was not white but black as the demon at whose shrine she had learned it. Then he smiled and asked her pleasantly, whether indeed she employed hypnosis in her miraculous exhibitions.

But her eyes became more sombre still, and, "I don't care to talk about it," she said. "I have already said too much."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry into professional secrets——"

"I can't talk about it," she repeated. ". . . Please—my glass is quite empty."

When he had refilled it:

"How did you get away from Yian?" he asked.

"The Japanese."

"What luck!"

"Yes. One battle was fought at Buldak. The Hassanis and Blue Flags were terribly cut up. Then, outside the walls of Yian, Prince Sanang's Tchortcha infantry made a stand. He was there with his Yezidee horsemen, all in leather and silk armour with casques and corselets of black Indian steel.

"I could see them from the temple—saw the Japanese gunners open fire. The Tchortchas were blown to shreds in the blast of the Japanese guns. . . . Sanang got away with some of his Yezidee horsemen."

"Where was that battle?"

"I told you, outside the walls of Yian."

"The newspapers never mentioned any such trouble in China," he said, suspiciously.

"Nobody knows about it except the Germans and the Japanese."

"Who is this Sanang?" he demanded.

"A Yezidee-Mongol. He is one of the Sheiks-el-Djebel—a servant of The Old Man of Mount Alamout."

"What is *he?*"

"A sorcerer—assassin."

"What!" exclaimed Cleves incredulously.

"Why, yes," she said, calmly. "Have you never heard of The Old Man of Mount Alamout?"

"Well, yes——"

"The succession has been unbroken since 1090 B.C. A Hassan Sabbah is still the present Old Man of the Mountain. His Yezidees worship Erlik. They are sorcerers. But you would not believe that."

Cleves said with a smile, "Who is Erlik?"

"The Mongols' Satan."

"Oh! So these Yezidees are devil-worshipers!"

"They are more. They *are* actually devils."

"You don't really believe that even in unexplored China there exists such a creature as a real sorcerer, do you?" he inquired, smilingly.

"I don't wish to talk of it."

To his surprise her face had flushed, and he thought her sensitive mouth quivered a little.

He watched her in silence for a moment; then, leaning a little way across the table:

"Where are you going when the show here closes?"

"To my boarding-house."

"And then?"

"To bed," she said, sullenly.

"And to-morrow what do you mean to do?"

"Go out to the agencies and ask for work."

"And if there is none?"

"The chorus," she said, indifferently.

"What salary have you been getting?"

She told him.

"Will you take three times that amount and work with me?"

CHAPTER IV

BODY AND SOUL

THE girl's direct gaze met his with that merciless searching intentness he already knew.

"What do you wish me to do?"

"Enter the service of the United States."

"Wh-what?"

"Work for the Government."

She was too taken aback to answer.

"Where were you born?" he demanded abruptly.

"In Albany, New York," she replied in a dazed way.

"You are loyal to your country?"

"Yes—certainly."

"You would not betray her?"

"No."

"I don't mean for money; I mean from fear."

After a moment, and, avoiding his gaze: "I am afraid of death," she said very simply.

He waited.

"I—I don't know what I might do—being afraid," she added in a troubled voice. "I desire to—live."

He still waited.

She lifted her eyes: "I'd try not to betray my country," she murmured.

"Try to face death for your country's honour?"

"Yes."

"And for your own?"

"Yes; and for my own."

He leaned nearer: "Yet you're taking a chance on your own honour to-night."

She blushed brightly: "I didn't think I was taking a very great chance with you."

He said: "You have found life too hard. And when you faced failure in New York you began to let go of life—real life, I mean. And you came up here to-night wondering whether you had courage to let yourself go. When I spoke to you it scared you. You found you hadn't the courage. But perhaps to-morrow you might find it—or next week—if sufficiently scared by hunger—you might venture to take the first step along the path that you say others usually take sooner or later."

The girl flushed scarlet, sat looking at him out of eyes grown dark with anger.

He said: "You told me an untruth. You *have* been tempted to betray your country. You have resisted. You *have* been threatened with death. You *have* had courage to defy threats and temptations where your country's honour was concerned!"

"How do you know?" she demanded.

He continued, ignoring the question: "From the time you landed in San Francisco you have been threatened. You tried to earn a living by your magician's tricks, but in city after city, as you came East, your uneasiness grew into fear, and your fear into terror, because every day more terribly confirmed your belief that people were following you determined either to use you to their own purposes or to murder you——"

The girl turned quite white and half rose in her chair, then sank back, staring at him out of dilated eyes. Then Cleves smiled: "So you've got the nerve to do Government work," he said, "and you've got the intelligence, and the knowledge, and something else—I don't know exactly what to call it—Skill? Dexterity? Sorcery?" he smiled—"I mean your professional ability. That's what I want—that bewildering dexterity of yours, to help your own country in the fight of its life. Will you enlist for service?"

"W-what fight?" she asked faintly.

"The fight with the Red Spectre."

"Anarchy?"

"Yes . . . Are you ready to leave this place? I want to talk to you."

"Where?"

"In my own rooms."

After a moment she rose.

"I'll go to your rooms with you," she said. She added very calmly that she was glad it was to be his rooms and not some other man's.

Out of countenance, he demanded what she meant, and she said quite candidly that she'd made up her mind to live at any cost, and that if she couldn't make an honest living she'd make a living anyway.

He offered no reply to this until they had reached the street and he had called a taxi.

On their way to his apartment he re-opened the subject rather bluntly, remarking that life was not worth living at the price she had mentioned.

"That is the accepted Christian theory," she replied coolly, "but circumstances alter things."

"Not such things."

"Oh, yes, they do. If one is already damned, what difference does anything else make?"

He asked, sarcastically, whether she considered herself already damned.

She did not reply for a few moments, then she said, in a quick, breathless way, that souls have been entrapped through ignorance of evil. And asked him if he did not believe it.

"No," he said, "I don't."

She shook her head. "You couldn't understand," she said. "But I've made up my mind to one thing; even if my soul has perished, my body shall not die for a long, long time. I mean to live," she added. "I shall not let my body be slain! They shall not steal life from me, whatever they have done to my soul——"

"What in heaven's name are you talking about?" he exclaimed. "Do you actually believe in soul-snatchers and life-stealers?"

She seemed sullen, her profile turned to him, her eyes on the brilliantly lighted avenue up which they were speeding. After a while: "I'd rather live decently and respectably if I can," she said. "That is the natural desire of any girl, I suppose. But if I can't, nevertheless I shall beat off death at any cost. And whatever the price of life is, I shall pay it. Because I am absolutely determined to go on living. And if I can't provide the means I'll have to let some man do it, I suppose."

"It's a good thing it was I who found you when you were out of a job," he remarked coldly.

"I hope so," she said. "Even in the beginning I didn't really believe you meant to be impertinent"—a tragic smile touched her lips—"and I was almost sorry——"

"Are you quite crazy?" he demanded.

"No, my mind is untouched. It's my soul that's gone. . . . Do you know I was very hungry when you spoke to me? The management wouldn't advance anything, and my last money went for my room. . . . Last Monday I had three dollars to face the future—and no job. I spent the last of it to-night on violets, orange juice and cakes. My furs and my gold bag remain. I can go two months more on them. Then it's a job or——" She shrugged and buried her nose in her violets.

"Suppose I advance you a month's salary?" he said.

"What am I to do for it?"

The taxi stopped at a florist's on the corner of Madison Avenue and 58th Street. Overhead were apartments. There was no elevator—merely the street door to unlock and four dim flights of stairs rising steeply to the top.

He lived on the top floor. As they paused before his door in the dim corridor:

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

She came nearer, laid a hand on his arm:

"Are *you* afraid?"

He stood silent, the latch-key in his hand.

"I'm not afraid of myself—if that is what you mean," he said.

"That is partly what I mean . . . you'll have to mount guard over your soul."

"I'll look out for my soul," he retorted dryly.

"Do so. I lost mine. I—I would not wish any harm to yours through our companionship."

"Don't you worry about my soul," he remarked, fitting the key to the lock. But again her hand fell on his wrist:

"Wait. I can't—can't help warning you. Neither your soul nor your body are safe if—if you ever do make of me a companion. I've *got* to tell you this!"

"What are you talking about?" he demanded bluntly.

"Because you have been courteous—considerate—and you *don't* know—oh, you don't realise what spiritual peril is!—What your soul and body have to fear if you—if you win me over—if you ever manage to make of me a friend!"

He said: "People follow and threaten you. We know that. I understand also that association with you involves me, and that I shall no doubt be menaced with bodily harm."

He laid his hand on hers where it still rested on his sleeves:

"But that's my business, Miss Norne," he added with a smile. "So, otherwise, it being merely a plain business affair between you and me, I think I may also venture my immortal soul alone with you in my room."

The girl flushed darkly.

"You have misunderstood," she said.

He looked at her coolly, intently; and arrived at no conclusion. Young, very lovely, confessedly without moral principle, he still could not believe her actually depraved. "What did you mean?" he said bluntly.

"In companionship with the lost, one might lose one's way—unawares. . . . Do you know that there is an Evil loose in the world which is bent upon conquest by *obtaining control of men's minds?*"

"No," he replied, amused.

"And that, through the capture of men's minds and souls the destruction of civilisation is being planned?"

"Is that what you learned in your captivity, Miss Norne?"

"You do not believe me."

"I believe your terrible experiences in China have shaken you to your tragic little soul. Horror and grief and loneliness have left scars on tender, impressionable youth. They would have slain maturity—

broken it, crushed it. But youth is flexible, pliable, and bends—gives way under pressure. Scars become slowly effaced. It shall be so with you. You will learn to understand that nothing really can harm the soul."

For a few moments' silence they stood facing each other on the dim landing outside his locked door.

"Nothing can slay our souls," he repeated in a grave voice. "I do not believe you really ever have done anything to wound even your self-respect. I do not believe you are capable of it, or ever have been, or ever will be. But somebody has deeply wounded you, spiritually, and has wounded your mind to persuade you that your soul is no longer in God's keeping. For that is a lie!"

He saw her features working with poignant emotions as though struggling to believe him.

"Souls are never lost," he said. "Ungoverned passions of every sort merely cripple them for a space. God always heals them in the end."

He laid his hand on the door-knob once more and lifted the latch-key.

"Don't!" she whispered, catching his hand again, "if there should be somebody in there waiting for us!"

"There is not a soul in my rooms. My servant sleeps out."

"There *is* somebody there!" she said, trembling.

"Nobody, Miss Norne. Will you come in with me?"

"I don't dare——"

"Why?"

"You and I alone together—no! oh, please—please! I am afraid!"

"Of what?"

"Of—giving you—my c-confidence—and trust—and—and f-friendship."

"I want you to."

"I must not! It would destroy us both, soul and body!"

"I tell you," he said, impatiently, "that there is no destruction of the soul—and it's a clean comradeship anyway—a fighting friendship I ask of you—*all* I ask; all I offer! Wherein, then, lies this peril in being alone together?"

"Because I am finding it in my heart to believe in you, trust you, hold fast to your strength and protection. And if I give way—yield—and if I make you a promise—and *if there is anybody in that room to see us and hear us—then* we shall be destroyed, both of us, soul and body——"

He took her hands, held them until their trembling ceased.

"I'll answer for our bodies. Let God look after the rest. Will you trust Him?"

She nodded.

"And me?"

"Yes."

But her face blanched as he turned the latch-key, switched on the electric light, and preceded her into the room beyond.

The place was one of those accentless, typical bachelor apartments made comfortable for anything masculine, but quite unlivable otherwise.

Live coals still glowed in the hob grate; he placed a lump of cannel coal on the embers, used a bellows vigorously and the flame caught with a greasy crackle.

The girl stood motionless until he pulled up an easy chair for her, then he found another for himself. She let slip her furs, folded her hands around the bunch of violets and waited.

"Now," he said, "I'll come to the point. In 1916 I was at Plattsburg, expecting a commission. The Department of Justice sent for me. I went to Washington where I was made to understand that I had been selected to serve my country in what is vaguely known as the Secret Service—and which includes government agents attached to several departments.

"The great war is over; but I am still retained in the service. Because something more sinister than a hun victory over civilisation threatens this Republic. And threatens the civilised world."

"Anarchy," she said.

"Bolshevism."

She did not stir in her chair.

She had become very white. She said nothing. He looked at her with his quiet, reassuring smile.

"That's what I want of you," he repeated.

"I want your help," he went on, "I want your valuable knowledge of the Orient. I want whatever secret information you possess. I want your rather amazing gifts, your unprecedented experience among almost unknown people, your familiarity with occult things, your astounding powers—whatever they are—hypnotic, psychic, material.

"Because, to-day, civilisation is engaged in a secret battle for existence against gathering powers of violence, the force and limit of which are still unguessed.

"It is a battle between righteousness and evil, between sanity and insanity, light and darkness, God and Satan! And if civilisation does not win, then the world perishes."

She raised her still eyes to his, but made no other movement.

"Miss Norne," he said, "we in the International Service know enough about you to desire to know more.

"We already knew the story you have told to me. Agents in the International Secret Service kept in touch with you from the time that the Japanese escorted you out of China.

"From the day you landed, and all across the Continent to New York, you have been kept in view by agents of this government.

"Here, in New York, my men have kept in touch with you. And now, to-night, the moment has come for a personal understanding between you and me."

The girl's pale lips moved—became stiffly articulate: "I—I wish to live," she stammered, "I fear death."

"I know it. I know what I ask when I ask your help."

She said in the ghost of a voice: "If I turn against *them*—they will kill me."

"They'll try," he said quietly.

"They will not fail, Mr. Cleves."

"That is in God's hands."

She became deathly white at that.

"No," she burst out in an agonised voice, "it is not in God's hands! If it were, I should not be afraid! It is in the hands of those who stole my soul!"

She covered her face with both arms, fairly writhing on her chair.

"If the Yezidees have actually made you believe any such nonsense"—he began; but she dropped her arms and stared at him out of terrible blue eyes:

"I don't want to die, I tell you! I am afraid!—*afraid!* If I reveal to you what I know they'll kill me. If I turn against them and aid you, they'll slay my body, and send it after my soul!"

She was trembling so violently that he sprang up and went to her. After a moment he passed one arm around her shoulders and held her firmly, close to him.

"Come," he said, "do your duty. Those who enlist under the banner of Christ have nothing to dread in this world or the next."

"If—if I could believe I were safe there."

"I tell you that you are. So is every human soul! What mad nonsense have the Yezidees made you believe? Is there any surer salvation for the soul than to die in Christ's service?"

He slipped his arm from her quivering shoulders and grasped both her hands, crushing them as though to steady every fibre in her tortured body.

"I want you to live. I want to live, too. But I tell you it's in God's hands, and we soldiers of civilisation have nothing to fear except failure to do our duty. Now, then, are we comrades under the United States Government?"

"O God—I—dare not!"

"*Are* we?"

Perhaps she felt the physical pain of his crushing grip for she turned and looked him in the eyes.

"I don't want to die," she whispered. "Don't make me!"

"Will you help your country?"

The terrible directness of her child's gaze became almost unendurable to him.

"Will you offer your country your soul and body?" he insisted in a low, tense voice.

Her stiff lips formed a word.

"Yes!" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

For a moment she rested against his shoulder, deathly white, then in a flash she had straightened, was on her feet in one bound and so swiftly that he scarcely followed her movement—was unaware that she had risen until he saw her standing there with a pistol glittering in her hand, her eyes fixed on the portières that hung across the corridor leading to his bedroom.

"What on earth," he began, but she interrupted him, keeping her gaze focused on the curtains, and the pistol resting level on her hip.

"I'll answer you if I die for it!" she cried. "I'll tell you everything I know! You wish to learn what is this monstrous evil that threatens the world with destruction—what you call anarchy and Bolshevism? It is an Evil that was born before Christ came! It is an Evil which not only destroys cities and empires and men but which is more terrible still for it obtains control of the human mind, and uses it at will; and it obtains sovereignty over the soul, and makes it [illegible]soner. Its aim is to dominate first, then to destroy, [illegible] conceived in the beginning by Erlik and by Sorcerers [illegible] . . Always, from the first, there have been sorcerers [illegible] devils.

"And when human history began to be [illegible]bered and chronicled, devils were living who worshiped Erlik and practised sorcery.

"They have been called by many names. A thousand years before Christ Hassan Sabbah founded his sect called Hassanis or Assassins. The Yezidees are of them. Their Chief is still called Sabbah; their creed is the annihilation of civilisation!"

Cleves had risen. The girl spoke in a clear, accentless monotone, not looking at him, her eyes and pistol centred on the motionless curtains.

"Look out!" she cried sharply.

"What is the matter?" he demanded. "Do you suppose anybody is hidden behind that curtain in the passageway?"

"If there is," she replied in her excited but distinct voice, "here is a tale to entertain him:

"The Hassanis are a sect of assassins which has spread out of Asia all over the world, and they are determined upon the annihilation of everything and everybody in it except themselves!

"In Germany is a branch of the sect. The hun is the lineal descendant of the ancient Yezidee; the gods of the hun are the old demons under other names; the desire and object of the hun is the same desire—to rule the minds and bodies and souls of men and use them to their own purposes!"

She lifted her pistol a little, came a pace forward:

"Anarchist, Yezidee, Hassani, Boche, Bolshevik—all are the same—all are secretly swarming in the hidden places for the same purpose!"

The girl's blue eyes were aflame, now, and the pistol was lifting slowly in her hand to a deadly level.

"Sanang!" she cried in a terrible voice.

"Sanang!" she cried again in her terrifying young voice—"Toad! Tortoise egg! Spittle of Erlik! May the Thirty Thousand Calamities overtake you! Sheik-el-Djebel!—cowardly Khan whom I laughed at from the temple when it rained yellow snakes on the marble steps when all the gongs in Yian sounded in your frightened ears!"

She waited.

"What! You won't step out? *Tokhta!*" she exclaimed in a ringing tone, and made a swift motion with her left hand. Apparently out of her empty open palm, like a missile hurled, a thin, blinding beam of light struck the curtains, making them suddenly transparent.

A man stood there.

He came out, moving very slowly as though partly stupefied. He wore evening dress under his overcoat, and had a long knife in his right hand.

Nobody spoke.

"So—I really was to die then, if I came here," said the girl in a wondering way.

Sanang's stealthy gaze rested on her, stole toward Cleves. He moistened his lips with his tongue. "You deliver me to this government agent?" he asked hoarsely.

"I deliver nobody by treachery. You may go, Sanang."

He hesitated, a graceful, faultless, metropolitan figure in top-hat and evening attire. Then, as he started to move, Cleves covered him with his weapon.

"I can't let that man go free!" cried Cleves angrily.

"Very well!" she retorted in a passionate voice—"then take him if you are able! *Tokhta!* Look out for yourself!"

Something swift as lightning struck the pistol from his grasp,—blinded him, half stunned him, set him reeling in a drenching blaze of light that blotted out all else.

He heard the door slam; he stumbled, caught at the back of a chair while his senses and sight were clearing.

"By heavens!" he whispered with ashen lips, "you

—you *are* a sorceress—or something. What—what are you doing to me?"

There was no answer. And when his vision cleared a little more he saw her crouched on the floor, her head against the locked door, listening, perhaps —or sobbing—he scarcely understood which until the quiver of her shoulders made it plainer.

When at last Cleves went to her and bent over and touched her she looked up at him out of wet eyes, and her grief-drawn mouth quivered.

"I—I don't know," she sobbed, "if he truly stole away my soul—there—there in the temple dusk of Yian. But he—he stole my heart—for all his wickedness—Sanang, Prince of the Yezidees—and I have been fighting him for it all these years—all these long years—fighting for what he stole in the temple dusk! . . . And now—now I have it back—my heart—all broken to pieces—here on the floor behind your—your bolted door."

CHAPTER V

THE ASSASSINS

ON the wall hung a map of Mongolia, that indefinite region a million and a half square miles in area, vast sections of which have never been explored.

Turkestan and China border it on the south, and Tibet almost touches it, not quite.

Even in the twelfth century, when the wild Mongols broke loose and nearly overran the world, the Tibet infantry under Genghis, the Tchortcha horsemen drafted out of Black China, and a great cloud of Mongol cavalry under the Prince of the Vanguard commanding half a hundred Hezars, never penetrated that grisly and unknown waste. The "Eight Towers of the Assassins" guarded it—still guard it, possibly.

The vice-regent of Erlik, Prince of Darkness, dwelt within this unknown land. And dwells there still, perhaps.

In front of this wall-map stood Tressa Norne.

Behind her, facing the map, four men were seated—three of them under thirty.

These three were volunteers in the service of the United States Government—men of independent means, of position, who had volunteered for military duty at the outbreak of the great war. However, they had been assigned by the Government to a very different sort of duty no less exciting than service on the fighting line, but far less conspicuous, for they had been drafted into the United States Department of Justice.

The names of these three were Victor Cleves, a professor of ornithology at Harvard University before the war; Alexander Selden, junior partner in the banking firm of Milwyn, Selden, and Co., and James Benton, a New York architect.

The fourth man's name was John Recklow. He might have been over fifty, or under. He was well-built, in a square, athletic way, clear-skinned and ruddy, grey-eyed, quiet in voice and manner. His hair and moustache had turned silvery. He had been employed by the Government for many years. He seemed to be enormously interested in what Miss Norne was saying.

Also he was the only man who interrupted her narrative to ask questions. And his questions revealed a knowledge which was making the girl more sensitive and uneasy every moment.

Finally, when she spoke of the Scarlet Desert, he asked if the Scarlet Lake were there and if the Xin was still supposed to inhabit its vermilion depths. And at that she turned and looked at him, her forefinger still resting on the map.

"Where have you ever heard of the Scarlet Lake and the Xin?" she asked as though frightened.

Recklow said quietly that as a boy he had served under Gordon and Sir Robert.

"If, as a boy, you served under Chinese Gordon, you already know much of what I have told you, Mr. Recklow. Is it not true?" she demanded nervously.

"That makes no difference," he replied with a smile. "It is all very new to these three young gentlemen. And as for myself, I am checking up what you say and comparing it with what I heard many, many years ago when my comrade Barres and I were in Yian."

"Did you really know Sir Robert Hart?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you not explain to these gentlemen?"

"Dear child," he interrupted gently, "what did Chinese Gordon or Sir Robert Hart, or even my comrade Barres, or I myself know about occult Asia in comparison to what you know?—a girl who has actually served the mysteries of Erlik for four amazing years!"

She paled a trifle, came slowly across the room to where Recklow was seated, laid a timid hand on his sleeve.

"Do you believe there are sorcerers in Asia?" she asked with that child-like directness which her wonderful blue eyes corroborated.

Recklow remained silent.

"Because," she went on, "if, in your heart, you do not believe this to be an accursed fact, then what I have to say will mean nothing to any of you."

Recklow touched his short, silvery moustache, hesitating. Then:

"The worship of Erlik is devil worship," he said. "Also I am entirely prepared to believe that there are, among the Yezidees, adepts who employ scientific weapons against civilisation—who have probably obtained a rather terrifying knowledge of psychic laws which they use scientifically, and which to ordinary, God-fearing folk appear to be the black magic of sorcerers."

Cleves said: "The employment by the huns of poison gases and long-range cannon is a parallel case. Before the war we could not believe in the possibility of a cannon that threw shells a distance of seventy miles."

The girl still addressed herself to Recklow: "Then you do not believe there are real sorcerers in Asia, Mr. Recklow?"

"Not sorcerers with supernatural powers for evil. Only degenerate human beings who, somehow, have managed to tap invisible psychic currents, and have learned how to use terrific forces about which, so far, we know practically nothing."

She spoke again in the same uneasy voice: "Then you do not believe that either God or Satan is involved?"

"No," he replied smilingly, "and you must not so believe."

"Nor the—the destruction of human souls," she persisted; "you do not believe it is being accomplished to-day?"

"Not in the slightest, dear young lady," he said cheerfully.

"Do you not believe that to have been instructed in such unlawful knowledge is damning? Do you not believe that ability to employ unknown forces is forbidden of God, and that to disobey His law means death to the soul?"

"No!"

"That it is the price one pays to Satan for occult power over people's minds?" she insisted.

"Hypnotic suggestion is not one of the cardinal sins," explained Recklow, still smiling—"unless wickedly employed. The Yezidee priesthood is a band of so-called sorcerers only because of their wicked employment of whatever hypnotic and psychic knowledge they may have obtained.

"There was nothing intrinsically wicked in the huns' discovery of phosgene. But the use they made of it made devils out of them. My ability to manufacture phosgene gas is no crime. But if I manufacture it and use it to poison innocent human beings, then, in that sense, I am, perhaps, a sort of modern sorcerer."

Tressa Norne turned paler:

"I had better tell you that I *have* used—forbidden knowledge—which the Yezidees taught me in the temple of Erlik."

"Used it how?" demanded Cleves.

"To—to earn a living. . . . And once or twice to defend myself."

There was the slightest scepticism in Recklow's bland smile. "You did quite right, Miss Norne."

She had become very white now. She stood beside Recklow, her back toward the suspended map, and looked in a scared sort of way from one to the other of the men seated before her, turning finally to Cleves, and coming toward him.

"I—I once killed a man," she said with a catch in her breath.

Cleves reddened with astonishment. "Why did you do that?" he asked.

"He was already on his way to kill me in bed."

"You were perfectly right," remarked Recklow coolly.

"I don't know . . . I was in bed. . . . And then, on the edge of sleep, I felt his mind groping to get hold of mine—feeling about in the darkness to get hold of my brain and seize it and paralyse it."

All colour had left her face. Cleves gripped the arm of his chair and watched her intently.

"I—I had only a moment's mental freedom," she went on in a ghost of a voice. "I was just able to rouse myself, fight off those murderous brain-fingers—let loose a clear mental ray. . . . And then, O God! I saw him in his room with his Kalmuck knife—saw him already on his way to murder me—Gutchlug Khan, the Yezidee—looking about in his bedroom for a shroud. . . . And when—when he reached for the bed to draw forth a fine, white sheet for the shroud without which no Yezidee dares journey deathward—then—*then* I became frightened. . . . And I killed him—I slew him there in his hotel bedroom on the floor above mine!"

Selden moistened his lips: "That Oriental, Gutchlug, died from heart-failure in a San Francisco hotel," he said. "I was there at the time."

"He died by the fangs of a little yellow snake," whispered the girl.

"There was no snake in his room," retorted Cleves.

"And no wound on his body," added Selden. "I attended the autopsy."

She said, faintly: "There was no snake, and no wound, as you say. . . . Yet Gutchlug died of both there in his bedroom. . . . And before he died he heard his soul bidding him farewell; and he saw the death-adder coiled in the sheet he clutched—saw the thing strike him again and again—saw and felt the tiny wounds on his left hand; felt the fangs pricking deep, deep into the veins; died of it there within the minute—died of the swiftest poison known. And yet——"

She turned her dead-white face to Cleves—"And yet *there was no snake there!* . . . And never had been. . . . And so I—I ask you, gentlemen, if souls do not die when minds learn to fight death with death—and deal it so swiftly, so silently, while one's body lies, unstirring on a bed—in a locked room on the floor below——"

She swayed a little, put out one hand rather blindly.

Recklow rose and passed a muscular arm around her; Cleves, beside her, held her left hand, crushing it, without intention, until she opened her eyes with a cry of pain.

"Are you all right?" asked Recklow bluntly.

"Yes." She turned and looked at Cleves and he caressed her bruised hand as though dazed.

"Tell me," she said to Cleves—"you who know—know more about my mind than anybody living——" a painful colour surged into her face—but she went on steadily, forcing herself to meet his gaze: "tell me, Mr. Cleves—do you still believe that nothing can really destroy my soul? And that it shall yet win through to safety?"

He said: "Your soul is in God's keeping, and always shall be. . . . And if the Yezidees have made you believe otherwise, they lie."

Recklow added in a slow, perplexed way: "I have no personal knowledge of psychic power. I am not psychic, not susceptible. But if you actually possess such ability, Miss Norne, and if you have employed such knowledge to defend your life, then you have done absolutely right."

"No guilt touches you," added Selden with an involuntary shiver, "if by hypnosis or psychic ability you really did put an end to that would-be murderer, Gutchlug."

Selden said: "If Gutchlug died by the fangs of a yellow death-adder which existed only in his own mind, and if you actually had anything to do with it you acted purely in self-defence."

"You did your full duty," added Benton—"but—good God!—it seems incredible to me, that such power can actually be available in the world!"

Recklow spoke again in his pleasant, undisturbed voice: "Go back to the map, Miss Norne, and tell us a little more about this rather terrifying thing which you believe menaces the civilised world with destruction."

Tressa Norne laid a slim finger on the map. Her voice had become steady. She said:

"The devil-worship, of which one of the modern developments is Bolshevism, and another the terrorism of the hun, began in Asia long before Christ's advent: At least so it was taught us in the temple of Erlik.

"It has always existed, its aim always has been the annihilation of good and the elevation of evil; the subjection of right by might, and the worldwide triumph of wrong.

"Perhaps it is as old as the first battle between God and Satan. I have wondered about it, sometimes. There in the dusk of the temple when the Eight Assassins came—the eight Sheiks-el-Djebel, all in white—chanting the Yakase of Sabbah—always that dirge when they came and spread their eight white shrouds on the temple steps——"

Her voice caught; she waited to recover her composure. Then went on:

"The ambition of Genghis was to conquer the world by force of arms. It was merely of physical subjection that he dreamed. But the Slayer of Souls——"

"Who?" asked Recklow sharply.

"The Slayer of Souls—Erlik's vice-regent on earth—Hassan Sabbah. The Old Man of the Mountain. It is of him I am speaking," exclaimed Tressa Norne—with quiet resolution. "Genghis sought only physical conquest of man; the Yezidee's ambition is more awful, *for he is attempting to surprise and seize the very minds of men!*"

There was a dead silence. Tressa looked palely upon the four.

"The Yezidees—who you tell me are not sorcerers—are using power—which you tell me is not magic accursed by God—to waylay, capture, enslave, and destroy *the minds and souls of mankind.*

"It may be that what they employ is hypnotic ability and psychic power and can be, some day, explained on a scientific basis when we learn more about the occult laws which govern these phenomena.

"But could anything render the threat less awful? For there have existed for centuries—perhaps always—a sect of Satanists determined upon the destruction of everything that is pure and holy and good on earth; and they are resolved to substitute for righteousness the dreadful reign of hell.

"In the beginning there were comparatively few of these human demons. Gradually, through the eras, they have increased. In the twelfth century there were fifty thousand of the Sect of Assassins.

"Beside the castle of the Slayer of Souls on Mount Alamout——" she laid her finger on the map—"eight other towers were erected for the Eight Chief Assassins, called Sheiks-el-Djebel.

"In the temple we were taught where these eight towers stood." She picked up a pencil, and on eight blank spaces of unexplored and unmapped Mongolia she made eight crosses. Then she turned to the men behind her.

"It was taught to us in the temple that from these eight *foci* of infection the disease of evil has been spreading throughout the world; from these eight towers have gone forth every year the emissaries of evil—perverted missionaries—to spread the poisonous propaganda, to teach it, to tamper stealthily with the minds of men, dominate them, pervert them, instruct them in the creed of the Assassin of Souls.

"All over the world are people, already contaminated, whose minds are already enslaved and poisoned, and who are infecting the still healthy brains of others—stealthily possessing themselves of the minds of mankind—teaching them evil, inviting them to mock the precepts of Christ.

"Of such lost minds are the degraded brains of the Germans—the pastors and philosophers who teach that might is right.

"Of such crippled minds are the Bolsheviki, poisoned long, long ago by close contact with Asia which, before that, had infected and enslaved the minds of the ruling classes with ferocious philosophy.

"Of such minds are all anarchists of every shade and stripe—all terrorists, all disciples of violence,—the murderously envious, the slothful slinking brotherhood which prowls through the world taking every opportunity to set it afire; those mentally dulled by reason of excesses; those weak intellects become unsound through futile gabble,—parlour socialists, amateur revolutionists, theoretical incapables excited by discussion fit only for healthy minds."

She left the map and came over to where the four men were seated terribly intent upon her every word.

"In the temple of Erlik, where my girlhood was passed after the murder of my parents, I learned what I am repeating to you," she said.

"I learned this, also, that the Eight Towers still exist—still stand to-day,—at least theoretically—and that from the Eight Towers pours forth across the world a stream of poison.

"I was told that, to every country, eight Yezidees were allotted—eight sorcerers—or adepts in scientific psychology if you prefer it—whose mission is to teach the gospel of hell and gradually but surely to win the minds of men to the service of the Slayer of Souls.

"That is what was taught us in the temple. We were educated in the development of occult powers—for it seems all human beings possess this psychic power latent within them—only few, even when instructed, acquire any ability to control and use this force. . . .

"I—I learned—rapidly. I even thought, sometimes, that the Yezidees were beginning to be a little afraid of me,—even the Hassani priests. . . . And the Sheiks-el-Djebel, spreading their shrouds on the temple steps, looked at me with unquiet eyes, where I stood like a corpse amid the incense clouds——"

She passed her fingers over her eyelids, then framed her face between both hands for a moment's thought lost in tragic retrospection.

"Kai!" she whispered dreamily as though to herself—"what Erlik awoke within my body that was asleep, God knows, but it was as though a twin comrade arose within me and looked out through my eyes upon a world which never before had been visible."

Utter silence reigned in the room: Cleves's breathing seemed almost painful to him so intently was he listening and watching this girl; Benton's hands whitened with his grip on the chair-arms; Selden, tense, absorbed, kept his keen gaze of a business man fastened on her face. Recklow slowly caressed the cold bowl of his pipe with both thumbs.

Tressa Norne's strange and remote eyes subtly altered, and she lifted her head and looked calmly at the men before her.

"I think that there is nothing more for me to add," she said. "The Red Spectre of Anarchy, called Bolshevism at present, threatens our country. Our

Government is now awake to this menace and the Secret Service is moving everywhere.

"Great damage already has been done to the minds of many people in this Republic; poison has spread; is spreading. The Eight Towers still stand. The Eight Assassins are in America.

"But these eight Assassins know me to be their enemy. . . . They will surely attempt to kill me. . . . I don't believe I can avoid—death—very long. . . . But I want to serve my country and—and mankind."

"They'll have to get me first," said Cleves, bluntly. "I shall not permit you out of my sight."

Recklow said in a musing voice: "And these eight gentlemen, who are very likely to hurt us, also, are the first people we ought to hunt."

"To get them," added Selden, "we ought to choke the stream at its source."

"To find out who they are is what is going to worry us," added Benton. Cleves had stood holding a chair for Tressa Norne. Finally she noticed it and seated herself as though tired.

"Is Sanang one of these eight?" he asked her. The girl turned and looked up at him, and he saw the flush mounting in her face.

"Sometimes," she said steadily, "I have almost believed he was Erlik's own vice-regent on earth—the Slayer of Souls himself."

Benton and Selden had gone. Recklow left a little later. Cleves accompanied him out to the landing.

"Are you going to keep Miss Norne here with you for the present?" inquired the older man.

"Yes. I dare not let her out of my sight, Recklow. What else can I do?"

"I don't know. Is she prepared for the consequences?"

"Gossip? Slander?"

"Of course."

"I can get a housekeeper."

"That only makes it look worse."

Cleves reddened. "Well, do you want to find her in some hotel or apartment with her throat cut?"

"No," replied Recklow, gently, "I do not."

"Then what else is there to do but keep her here in my own apartment and never let her out of my sight until we can find and lock up the eight gentlemen who are undoubtedly bent on murdering her?"

"Isn't there some woman in the Service who could help out? I could mention several."

"I tell you I can't trust Tressa Norne to anybody except myself," insisted Cleves. "I got her into this; I am responsible if she is murdered; I dare not entrust her safety to anybody else. And, Recklow, it's a ghastly responsibility for a man to induce a young girl to face death, even in the service of her country."

"If she remains here alone with you she'll face social destruction," remarked Recklow.

Cleves was silent for a moment, then he burst out: "Well, what am I to do? What is there left for me to do except to watch over her and see her through this devilish business? What other way have I to protect her, Recklow?"

"You could offer her the protection of your name," suggested the other, carelessly.

"What? You mean—marry her?"

"Well, nobody else would be inclined to, Cleves, if it ever becomes known she has lived here quite alone with you."

Cleves stared at the elder man.

"This is nonsense," he said in a harsh voice. "That young girl doesn't want to marry anybody. Neither do I. She doesn't wish to have her throat cut, that's all. And I'm determined she shan't."

"There are stealthier assassins, Cleves,—the slayers of reputations. It goes badly with their victim. It does indeed."

"Well, hang it, what do you think I ought to do?"

"I think you ought to marry her if you're going to keep her here."

"Suppose she doesn't mind the unconventionality of it?"

"All women mind. No woman, at heart, is unconventional, Cleves."

"She—she seems to agree with me that she ought to stay here. . . . Besides, she has no money, no relatives, no friends in America——"

"All the more tragic. If you really believe it to be your duty to keep her here where you can look after her bodily safety, then the other obligation is still heavier. And there may come a day when Miss Norne will wish that you had been less conscientious concerning the safety of her pretty throat. . . . For the knife of the Yezidee is swifter and less cruel than the tongue that slays with a smile. . . . And this young girl has many years to live, after this business of Bolshevism is dead and forgotten in our Republic."

"Recklow!"

"Yes?"

"You think I might dare try to find a room somewhere else for her and let her take her chances? *Do* you?"

"It's your affair."

"I know—hang it! I know it's my affair. I've unintentionally made it so. But can't you tell me what I ought to do?"

"I can't."

"What would *you* do?"

"Don't ask me," returned Recklow, sharply. "If you're not man enough to come to a decision you may turn her over to me."

Cleves flushed brightly. "Do you think *you* are old enough to take my job and avoid scandal?"

Recklow's cold eyes rested on him: "If you like," he said, "I'll assume your various kinds of personal responsibility toward Miss Norne."

Cleve's visage burned. "I'll shoulder my own burdens," he retorted.

"Sure. I knew you would." And Recklow smiled and held out his hand. Cleves took it without cordiality. Standing so, Recklow, still smiling, said: "What a rotten deal that child has had—is having. Her father and mother were fine people. Did you ever hear of Dr. Norne?"

"She mentioned him once."

"They were up-State people of most excellent antecedents and no money.

"Dr. Norne was our Vice-Consul at Yarkand in the province of Sin Kiang. All he had was his salary, and he lost that and his post when the administration changed. Then he went into the spice trade.

"Some Jew syndicate here sent him up the Yarkand River to see what could be done about jade and gold concessions. He was on that business when the tragedy happened. The Kalmuks and Khirghiz were responsible, under Yezidee instigation. And there you are:—and here is his child, Cleves—back, by some miracle, from that flowering hell called Yian, believing in her heart that she really lost her soul there in the temple. And now, here in her own native land, she is exposed to actual and hourly danger of assassination. . . . Poor kid! . . . Did you ever hear of a rottener deal, Cleves?"

Their hands had remained clasped while Recklow was speaking. He spoke again, clearly, amiably:

"To lay down one's life for a friend is fine. I'm not sure that it's finer to offer one's honour in behalf of a girl whose honour is at stake."

After a moment Cleves's grip tightened

"All right," he said.

Recklow went downstair

CHAPTER VI

IN BATTLE

CLEVES went back into the apartment; he noticed that Miss Norne's door was ajar.

To get to his own room he had to pass that way; and he saw her, seated before the mirror, partly undressed, her dark, lustrous hair being combed out and twisted up for the night.

Whether this carelessness was born of innocence or of indifference mattered little; he suddenly realised that these conditions wouldn't do. And his first feeling was of anger.

"If you'll put on your robe and slippers," he said in an unpleasant voice, "I'd like to talk to you for a few moments."

She turned her head on its charming neck and looked around and up at him over one naked shoulder.

"Shall I come into your room?" she inquired.

"No! . . . when you've got some clothes on, call me."

"I'm quite ready now," she said calmly, and drew the Chinese slippers over her bare feet and passed a silken loop over the silver bell buttons on her right shoulder. Then, undisturbed, she continued to twist up her hair, following his movements in the mirror with unconcerned blue eyes.

He entered and seated himself, the impatient expression still creasing his forehead and altering his rather agreeable features.

"Miss Norne," he said, "you're absolutely convinced that these people mean to do you harm. Isn't that true?"

"Of course," she said simply.

"Then, until we get them, you're running a serious risk. In fact, you live in hourly peril. That is your belief, isn't it?"

She put the last peg into her thick, curly hair, lowered her arms, turned, dropped one knee over the other, and let her candid gaze rest on him in silence.

"What I mean to explain," he said coldly, "is that as long as I induced you to go into this affair I'm responsible for you. If I let you out of my sight here in New York and if anything happens to you, I'll be as guilty as the dirty beast who takes your life. What is your opinion? It's up to me to stand by you now, isn't it?"

"I had rather be near you—for a while," she said timidly.

"Certainly. But, Miss Norne, our living here together, in my apartment—or living together anywhere else—is never going to be understood by other people. You know that, don't you?"

After a silence, still looking at him out of clear, unembarrassed eyes:

"I know. . . . But . . . I don't want to die."

"I told you," he said sharply, "they'll have to kill me first. So that's all right. But how about what I am doing to your reputation?"

"I understand."

"I suppose you do. You're very young. Once out of this blooming mess, you will have all your life before you. But if I kill your reputation for you while saving your body from death, you'll find no happiness in living. Do you realise that?"

"Yes."

"Well, then? Have you any solution for this problem that confronts you?"

"No."

"Haven't you any idea to suggest?"

"I don't—don't want to die," she repeated in an unsteady voice.

He bit his lip; and after a moment's scowling silence under the merciless scrutiny of her eyes: "Then you had better marry me," he said.

It was some time before she spoke. For a second or two he sustained the searching quality of her gaze, but it became unendurable.

Presently she said: "I don't ask it of you. I can shoulder my own burdens." And he remembered what he had just said to Recklow.

"You've shouldered more than your share," he blurted out. "You are deliberately risking death to serve your country. I enlisted you. The least I can do is to say my affections are not engaged; so naturally the idea of—of marrying anybody never entered my head."

"Then you do not care for anybody else?"

Her candour amazed and disconcerted him.

"No." He looked at her, curiously. "Do you care for anybody in that way?"

A light blush tinted her face. She said gravely: "If we really are going to marry each other I had better tell you that I did care for Prince Sanang."

"What!" he cried, astounded.

"It seems incredible, doesn't it? Yet it is quite true. I fought him; I fought myself; I stood guard over my mind and senses there in the temple; I knew what he was and I detested him and I mocked him there in the temple. . . . And I loved him."

"Sanang!" he repeated, not only amazed but also oddly incensed at the naïve confession.

"Yes, Sanang. . . . If we are to marry, I thought I ought to tell you. Don't you think so?"

"Certainly," he replied in an absent-minded way, his mind still grasping at the thing. Then, looking up: "Do you still care for this fellow?"

She shook her head.

"Are you perfectly sure, Miss Norne?"

"As sure as that I am alive when I awake from a nightmare. My hatred for Sanang is very bitter," she added frankly, "and yet somehow it is not my wish to see him harmed."

"You still care for him a little?"

"Oh, no. But—can't you understand that it is not in me to wish him harm? . . . No girl feels that way—once having cared. To become indifferent to a familiar thing is perhaps natural; but to desire to harm it is not in my character."

"You have plenty of character," he said, staring at her.

"You don't think so. Do you?"

"Why not?"

"Because of what I said to you on the roof-garden that night. It was shameful, wasn't it?"

"You behaved like many a thoroughbred," he returned bluntly; "you were scared, bewildered, ready to bolt to any shelter offered."

"It's quite true I didn't know what to do to keep alive. And that was all that interested me—to keep on living—having lost my soul and being afraid to die and find myself in hell with Erlik."

He said: "Isn't that absurd notion out of your head yet?"

"I don't know. . . . I can't suddenly believe myself safe after all those years. It is not easy to root out what was planted in childhood and what grew to be part of one during the tender and formative period. . . . You can't understand, Mr. Cleves—you can't ever feel or visualise what became my daily life in a region which was half paradise and half hell——"

She bent her head and took her face between her fingers, and sat so, brooding.

After a little while: "Well," he said, "there's only one way to manage this affair—if you are willing, Miss Norne."

She merely lifted her eyes.

"I think," he said, "there's only that one way out of it. But you understand"—he turned pink—"it will be quite all right—your liberty—privacy—I shan't bother you—annoy——"

She merely looked at him.

"After this Bolshevistic flurry is settled—in a year or two—or three—then you can very easily get your freedom; and you'll have all life before you" . . . he rose: "—and a jolly good friend in me—a good comrade, Miss Norne. And that means you can count on me when you go into business—or whatever you decide to do."

She also had risen, standing slim and calm in her exquisite Chinese robe, the sleeves of which covered her finger tips.

"Are you going to marry me?" she asked.

"If you'll let me."

"Yes—I will . . . it's so generous and considerate of you. I—I don't ask it; I really don't——"

"But *I* do."

"—And I never dreamed of such a thing."

He forced a smile. "Nor I. It's rather a crazy thing to do. But I know of no saner alternative. . . . So we had better get our license to-morrow. . . . And that settles it."

He turned to go; and, on her threshold, his feet caught in something on the floor and he stumbled, trying to free his feet from a roll of soft white cloth lying there on the carpet. And when he picked it up, it unrolled, and a knife fell out of the folds of cloth and struck his foot.

Still perplexed, not comprehending, he stooped to recover the knife. Then, straightening up, he found himself looking into the colourless face of Tressa Norne.

"What's all this?" he asked—"this sheet and knife here on the floor outside your door?"

She answered with difficulty: "They have sent you your shroud, I think."

"Are not those things yours? Were they not already here in your baggage?" he demanded incredulously. Then, realising that they had not been there on the door-sill when he entered her room a few moments since, a rough chill passed over him—the icy caress of fear.

"Where did that thing come from?" he said hoarsely. "How could it get here when my door is locked and bolted? Unless there's somebody hidden here!"

Hot anger suddenly flooded him; he drew his pistol and sprang into the passageway.

"What the devil is all this!" he repeated furiously, flinging open his bedroom door and switching on the light.

He searched his room in a rage, went on and searched the dining-room, smoking-room, and kitchen, and every clothes-press and closet, always aware of Tressa's presence close behind him. And when there remained no tiniest nook or cranny in the place unsearched, he stood in the centre of the carpet glaring at the locked and bolted door.

He heard her say under her breath: "This is going to be a sleepless night. And a dangerous one." And, turning to stare at her, saw no fear in her face, only excitement.

He still held clutched in his left hand the sheet and the knife. Now he thrust these toward her.

"What's this damned foolery, anyway?" he demanded harshly. She took the knife with a slight shudder. "There is something engraved on the silver hilt," she said.

He bent over her shoulder.

"Eighur," she added calmly, "not Arabic. The Mongols had no written characters of their own."

She bent closer, studying the inscription. After a moment, still studying the Eighur characters, she rested her left hand on his shoulder—an impulsive, unstudied movement that might have meant either confidence or protection.

"Look," she said, "it is not addressed to you after all, but to a symbol—a series of numbers, 53-6-26."

"That is my designation in the Federal Service," he said, sharply.

"Oh!" she nodded slowly. "Then this is what is written in the Mongol-Yezidee dialect, traced out in Eighur characters: 'To 53-6-26! By one of the Eight Assassins the Slayer of Souls sends this shroud and this knife from Mount Alamout. Such a blade shall divide your heart. This sheet is for your corpse.'"

After a grim silence he flung the soft white cloth on the floor.

"There's no use my pretending I'm not surprised and worried," he said; "I don't know how that cloth got here. Do you?"

"It was sent."

"How?"

She shook her head and gave him a grave, confused look.

"There are ways. You could not understand. . . . This is going to be a sleepless night for us."

"You can go to bed, Tressa. I'll sit up and read and keep an eye on that door."

"I can't let you remain alone here. I'm afraid to do that."

He gave a laugh, not quite pleasant, as he suddenly comprehended that the girl now considered their *rôles* to be reversed.

"Are *you* planning to sit up in order to protect *me?*" he asked, grimly amused.

"Do you mind?"

"Why, you blessed little thing, I can take care of myself. How funny of you, when I am trying to plan how best to look out for *you!*"

But her face remained pale and concerned, and she rested her left hand more firmly on his shoulder.

"I wish to remain awake with you," she said. "Because I myself don't fully understand this"—she looked at the knife in her palm, then down at the shroud. "It is going to be a strange night for us," she sighed. "Let us sit together here on the lounge where I can face *that bolted door.* And if you are willing, I am going to turn out the lights——" She suddenly bent forward and switched them off—"because I must keep my mind on guard."

"Why do you do that?" he asked, "you can't see the door, now."

"Let me help you in my own way," she whispered. "I—I am very deeply disturbed, and very, very angry. I do not understand this new menace. Yezidee that I am, I do not understand what kind of danger threatens you through your loyalty to me."

She drew him forward, and he opened his mouth to remonstrate, to laugh; but as he turned, his foot touched the shroud, and an uncontrollable shiver passed over him.

They went close together, across the dim room to the lounge, and seated themselves. Enough light from Madison Avenue made objects in the room barely discernible.

Sounds from the street below became rarer as the hours wore away. The iron jar of trams, the rattle of vehicles, the harsh warning of taxicabs broke the stillness at longer and longer intervals, until, save only for that immense and ceaseless vibration of the monstrous iron city under the foggy stars, scarcely a sound stirred the silence.

The half-hour had struck long ago on the bell of the little clock. Now the clear bell sounded three times.

Cleves stirred on the lounge beside Tressa. Again and again he had thought that she was asleep for her head had fallen back against the cushions, and she lay very still. But always, when he leaned nearer to peer down at her, he saw her eyes open, and fixed intently upon the bolted door.

His pistol, which still rested on his knee, was pointed across the room, toward the door. Once he reminded her in a whisper that she was unarmed and that it might be as well for her to go and get her pistol. But she murmured that she was sufficiently equipped; and, in spite of himself, he shivered as he glanced down at her frail and empty hands.

It was some time between three and half-past, he judged, when a sudden movement of the girl brought him upright on his seat, quivering with excitement.

"Mr. Cleves!"

"Yes?"

"The Sorcerers!"

"Where? Outside the door?"

"Oh, my God," she murmured, *"they are after my mind again!* Their fingers are groping to seize my brain and get possession of it!"

"What!" he stammered, horrified.

"Here—in the dark," she whispered—"and I feel their fingers caressing me—searching—moving stealthily to surprise and grasp my thoughts. . . . I know what they are doing . . . I am resisting . . . I am fighting—fighting!"

She sat bolt upright with clenched hands at her breast, her face palely aglow in the dimness as though illumined by some vivid inward light—or, as he thought—from the azure blaze in her wide-open eyes.

"Is—is this what you call—what you believe to be magic?" he asked unsteadily. "Is there some hostile psychic influence threatening you?"

"Yes. I'm resisting. I'm fighting—fighting. They shall not trap me. They shall not harm you! . . . I know how to defend myself and you! . . . And *you!*"

Suddenly she flung her left arm around his neck and the delicate clenched hand brushed his cheek.

"They shall not have you," she breathed. "I am fighting. I am holding my own. There are eight of them—eight Assassins! My mind is in battle with theirs—fiercely in battle. . . . I hold my own! I am armed and waiting!"

With a convulsive movement she drew his head closer to her shoulder. "Eight of them!" she whispered,—"trying to entrap and seize my brain. But my thoughts are free! My mind is defending you—you, here in my arms!"

After a breathless silence: "Look out!" she whispered with terrible energy; "they are after *your* mind at last. Fix your thoughts on me! Keep your mind clear of their net! Don't let their ghostly fingers touch it. Look at me!" She drew him closer. "Look at *me!* Believe in *me!* I can resist. I can defend you. Does your head feel confused?"

"Yes—numb."

"Don't sleep! Don't close your eyes! Keep them open and look at me!"

"I can scarcely see you——"

"You *must* see me!"

"My eyes are heavy," he said drowsily. "I can't see you, Tressa——"

"Wake! Look at me! Keep your mind clear. Oh, I beg you—I beg you! They're after our minds and souls, I tell you! Oh, believe in me," she beseeched him in an agonised whisper—"Can't you believe in me for a moment,—as if you loved me!"

His heavy lids lifted and he tried to look at her.

"Can you see me? *Can* you?"

He muttered something in a confused voice.

"Victor!"

At the sound of his own name, he opened his eyes again and tried to straighten up, but his pistol fell to the carpet.

"Victor!" she gasped, "clear your mind in the name of God!"

"I can not——"

"I tell you hell is opening beyond that door!—outside your bolted door, there! Can't you believe me! Can't you hear me! Oh, what will hold you if the love of God can not!" she burst out. "I'd crucify myself for you if you'd look at me—if you'd only fight hard enough to believe in me—as though you loved me!"

His eyes unclosed but he sank back against her shoulder.

"Victor!" she cried in a terrible voice.

There was no answer.

"If the love of God could only hold you for a moment more!"—she stammered with her mouth against his ear, "just for a moment, Victor! Can't you hear me?"

"Yes—very far away."

"Fight for me! Try to care for me! Don't let Sanang have me!"

He shuddered in her arms, reached out and resting heavily on her shoulder, staggered to his feet and stood swaying like a drunken man.

"No, by God," he said thickly, "Sanang shall not touch you."

The girl was on her feet now, holding him upright with an arm around his shoulders.

"They can't—can't harm us together," she stammered. "Hark! Listen! Can you hear? Oh, can you hear?"

"Give me my pistol," he tried to say, but his tongue seemed twisted. "No—by God—Sanang shall not touch you."

She stooped lithely and recovered the weapon. "Hush," she said close to his burning face. "Listen. Our minds are safe! I can hear somebody's soul bidding its body farewell!"

White-lipped she burst out laughing, kicked the shroud out of the way, thrust the pistol into his right hand, went forward, forcing him along beside her, and drew the bolts from the door.

Suddenly he spoke distinctly:

"Is there anything outside that door on the landing?"

"Yes . . . I don't know what. Are you ready?" She laid her hand on lock and knob.

He nodded. At the same instant she jerked open the door; and a hunchback who had been picking at the lock fell headlong into the room, his pistol exploding on the carpet in a streak of fire.

It was a horrible struggle to secure the powerful misshapen creature, for he clawed and squealed and bounced about on the floor, striking blindly with apelike arms. But at last Cleves held him down, throttled and twitching, and Tressa ripped strips from the shroud to truss up the writhing thing.

Then Cleves switched on the light.

"Why—why—you rat!" he exclaimed in hysterical relief at seeing a living man whom he recognised there at his feet. "What are you doing here?"

The hunchback's red eyes blazed up at him from the floor.

"Who—who is he?" faltered the girl.

"He's a German tailor named Albert Feke—one of the Chicago Bolsheviki—the most dangerous sort we harbour—one of their vile leaders who preaches that might is right and tells his disciples to go ahead and take what they want."

He looked down at the malignant cripple.

"You're wanted for the I. W. W. bomb murder, Albert. Did you know it?"

The hunchback licked his bloody lips. Then he kicked himself to a sitting position, squatted there like a toad and looked steadily at Tressa Norne out of small red-rimmed eyes. Blood dripped on his beard; his huge hairy fists, tied and crossed behind his back, made odd, spasmodic movements.

Cleves went to the telephone. Presently Tressa heard his voice, calm and distinct as usual:

"We've caught Albert Feke. He's here at my rooms. I'd like to have you come over, Recklow. . . . Oh, yes, he kicked and scuffled and scratched like a cat. . . . What? . . . No, I hadn't heard that he'd been in China. . . . Who? . . . Albert Feke? You say he was one of the Germans who escaped from Shantung four years ago? . . . You think he's a Yezidee! You mean one of the Eight Assassins?"

The hunchback, staring at Tressa out of red-rimmed eyes, suddenly snarled and lurched his misshapen body at her.

"Teufelstuck!" he screamed, "ain't I tell effery-body in Yian already it iss safer if we cut your throat! Devil-slut of Erlik—snow-leopardess!—cat of the Yezidees who has made of Sanang a fool!—it iss I who haf said always, always, that you know too damn much! . . . Kai! . . . I hear my soul bidding me farewell. Gif me my shroud!"

Cleves came back from the telephone. With the toe of his left foot he lifted the shroud and kicked it across the hunchback's knees.

"So you were one of the huns who instigated the massacre in Yian," he said, curiously. At that Tressa turned very white and a cry escaped her.

But the hunchback's features were all twisted into ferocious laughter, and he beat on the carpet with the heels of his great splay feet.

"Ja! Ja!" he shrieked, "in Yian it vas a goot hunting! English and Yankee men und vimmens ve haff dropped into dose deep wells down. Py Gott in Himmel, how dey schream up out of dose deep wells in Yian!" He began to cackle and shriek in his frenzy. "Ach Gott ja! It iss not you either—you there, Keuke Mongol, who shall escape from the Sheiks-el-Djebel! It iss dot Old Man of the Mountain who shall tell your soul it iss time to say farewell! Ja! Ja! Ach Gott!—it iss my only regret that I shall not see the world when it is all afire! Ja! Ja!—all on fire like hell! But you shall see it, slut-leopard of the snows! You shall see it und you shall burn! Kai! Kai! My soul it iss bidding my body farewell. Kai! May Erlik curse you, Keuke Mongol—Heavenly Azure—Sorceress of the temple!—"

He spat at her and rolled over in his shroud.

The girl looking down on him closed her eyes for a moment, and Cleves saw her bloodless lips move, and bent nearer, listening. And he heard her whispering to herself:

"Preserve us all, O God, from the wrath of Satan who was stoned."

CHAPTER VII

THE BRIDAL

OVER the United States stretched an unseen network of secret intrigue woven tirelessly night and day by the busy enemies of civilisation—Reds, parlour-socialists, enemy-aliens, terrorists, Bolsheviki, pseudo-intellectuals, I. W. W.'s, social faddists, and amateur meddlers of every nuance—all the various varieties of the vicious, witless, and mentally unhinged—brought together through the "cohesive power of plunder" and the degeneration of cranial tissue.

All over the United States the various departmental divisions of the Secret Service were busily following up these threads of intrigue leading everywhere through the obscurity of this vast and secret maze.

To meet the constantly increasing danger of physical violence and to uncover secret plots threatening sabotage and revolution, there were capable agents in every branch of the Secret Service, both Federal and State.

But in the first months of 1919 something more terrifying than physical violence suddenly threatened civilised America,—a wild, grotesque, incredible threat of a *war on human minds!*

And, little by little, the United States Government became convinced that this ghastly menace was no dream of a disordered imagination, but that it was real: that among the enemies of civilisation there actually existed a few powerful but perverted minds capable of wielding psychic forces as terrific weapons: that by the sinister use of psychic knowledge controlling these mighty forces the very minds of mankind could be stealthily approached, seized, controlled and turned upon civilisation to aid in the world's destruction.

In terrible alarm the Government turned to England for advice. But Sir William Crookes was dead.

However, in England, Sir Conan Doyle immediately took up the matter, and in America Professor Hyslop was called into consultation.

And then, when the Government was beginning to realise what this awful menace meant, and that there were actually in the United States possibly half a dozen people who already had begun to carry on a diabolical warfare by means of psychic power, for the purpose of enslaving and controlling the very minds of men,—then, in the terrible moment of discovery, a young girl landed in America after fourteen years' absence in Asia.

And this was the amazing girl that Victor Cleves had just married, at Recklow's suggestion, and in the line of professional duty,—and moral duty, perhaps.

It had been a brief, matter-of-fact ceremony. John

Recklow, of the Secret Service, was there; also Benton and Selden of the same service.

The bride's lips were unresponsive; cold as the touch of the groom's unsteady hand.

She looked down at her new ring in a blank sort of way, gave her hand listlessly to Recklow and to the others in turn, whispered a timidly comprehensive "Thank you," and walked away beside Cleves as though dazed.

There was a taxicab waiting. Tressa entered. Recklow came out and spoke to Cleves in a low voice.

"Don't worry," replied Cleves dryly. "That's why I married her."

"Where are you going now?" inquired Recklow.

"Back to my apartment."

"Why don't you take her away for a month?"

Cleves flushed with annoyance: "This is no occasion for a wedding trip. You understand that, Recklow."

"I understand. But we ought to give her a breathing space. She's had nothing but trouble. She's worn out."

Cleves hesitated: "I can guard her better in the apartment. Isn't it safer to go back there, where your people are always watching the street and house day and night?"

"In a way it might be safer, perhaps. But that girl is nearly exhausted. And her value to us is unlimited. She may be the vital factor in this fight with anarchy. Her weapon is her mind. And it's got to have a chance to rest."

Cleves, with one hand on the cab door, looked around impatiently.

"Do *you,* also, conclude that the psychic factor is actually part of this damned problem of Bolshevism?"

Recklow's cool eyes measured him: "Do *you?*"

"My God, Recklow, I don't know—after what my own eyes have seen."

"I don't know either," said the other calmly, "but I am taking no chances. I don't attempt to explain certain things that have occurred. But if it be true that a misuse of psychic ability by foreigners—Asiatics—among the anarchists is responsible for some of the devilish things being done in the United States, then your wife's unparalleled knowledge of the occult East is absolutely vital to us. And so I say, better take her away somewhere and give her mind a chance to recover from the incessant strain of these tragic years."

The two men stood silent for a moment, then Recklow went to the window of the taxicab.

"I have been suggesting a trip into the country, Mrs. Cleves," he said pleasantly, "—into the real country, somewhere,—a month's quiet in the woods, perhaps. Wouldn't it appeal to you?"

Cleves turned to catch her low-voiced answer.

"I should like it very much," she said in that odd, hushed way of speaking, which seemed to have altered her own voice and manner since the ceremony a little while before.

Driving back to his apartment beside her, he strove to realise that this girl was his wife.

One of her gloves lay across her lap, and on it rested a slender hand. And on one finger was his ring.

But Victor Cleves could not bring himself to believe that this brand-new ring really signified anything to him,—that it had altered his own life in any way. But always his incredulous eyes returned to that slim finger resting there, unstirring, banded with a narrow circlet of virgin gold.

In the apartment they did not seem to know exactly what to do or say—what attitude to assume—what effort to make.

Tressa went into her own room, removed her hat and furs, and came slowly back into the living-room, where Cleves still stood gazing absently out of the window.

A fine rain was falling.

They seated themselves. There seemed nothing better to do.

He said, politely: "In regard to going away for a rest, you wouldn't care for the North Woods, I fancy, unless you like winter sports. Do you?"

"I like sunlight and green leaves," she said in that odd, still voice.

"Then, if it would please you to go South for a few weeks' rest——"

"Would it inconvenience you?"

Her manner touched him.

"My dear Miss Norne," he began, and checked himself, flushing painfully. The girl blushed, too; then, when he began to laugh, her lovely, bashful smile glimmered for the first time.

"I really can't bring myself to realise that you and I are married," he explained, still embarrassed, though smiling.

Her smile became an endeavour. "I can't believe it either, Mr. Cleves," she said. "I feel rather stunned."

"Hadn't you better call me Victor—under the circumstances?" he suggested, striving to speak lightly.

"Yes. . . . It will not be very easy to say it—not for some time, I think."

"Tressa?"

"Yes."

"Yes—*what?*"

"Yes—Victor."

"That's the idea," he insisted with forced gaiety. "The thing to do is to face this rather funny situation and take it amiably and with good humour. You'll have your freedom some day, you know."

"Yes—I—know."

"And we're already on very good terms. We find each other interesting, don't we?"

"Yes."

"It even seems to me," he ventured, "it certainly seems to me, at times, as though we are approaching a common basis of—of mutual—er—esteem."

"Yes. I—I do esteem you, Mr. Cleves."

"In point of fact," he concluded, surprised, "we *are* friends—in a way. Wouldn't you call it—friendship?"

"I think so, I think I'd call it that," she admitted.

"I think so, too. And that is lucky for us. That makes this crazy situation more comfortable—less—well, perhaps less ponderous."

The girl assented with a vague smile, but her eyes remained lowered.

"You see," he went on, "when two people are as oddly situated as we are, they're likely to be afraid of being in each other's way. But they ought to get on without being unhappy as long as they are quite confident of each other's friendly consideration. Don't you think so, Tressa?"

Her lowered eyes rested steadily on her ring-finger. "Yes," she said. "And I am not—unhappy, or—afraid."

She lifted her blue gaze to his; and, somehow, he thought of her barbaric name, Keuke,—and its Yezidee significance, "heavenly—azure."

"Are we really going away together?" she asked timidly.

"Certainly, if you wish."

"If you, also, wish it, Mr. Cleves."

He found himself saying with emphasis that he always wished to do what she desired. And he added, more gently:

"You *are* tired, Tressa—tired and lonely and unhappy."

"Tired, but not the—others."

"Not unhappy?"

"No."

"Aren't you lonely?"

"Not with you."

The answer came so naturally, so calmly, that the slight sensation of pleasure it gave him arrived only as an agreeable afterglow.

"We'll go South," he said. . . . "I'm so glad that you don't feel lonely with me."

"Will it be warmer where we are going, Mr. Cleves?"

"Yes—you poor child! You need warmth and sunshine, don't you? Was it warm in Yian, where you lived so many years?"

"It was always June in Yian," she said under her breath.

She seemed to have fallen into a revery; he watched the sensitive face. Almost imperceptibly it changed; became altered, younger, strangely lovely.

Presently she looked up—and it seemed to him that it was not Tressa Norne at all he saw, but little Keuke—Heavenly Azure—of the Yezidee temple, as she dropped one slim knee over the other and crossed her hands above it.

"It was very beautiful in Yian," she said, "—Yian of the thousand bridges and scented gardens so full of lilies. Even after they took me to the temple, and I thought the world was ending, God's skies still remained soft overhead, and His weather fair and golden. . . . And when, in the month of the Snake, the Eight Sheiks-el-Djebel came to the temple to spread their shrouds on the rose-marble steps, then, after they had departed, chanting the Prayers for the Dead, each to his Tower of Silence, we temple girls were free for a week. . . . And once I went with Tchagane—a girl—and with Yulun—another girl—and we took our keutch, which is our luggage, and we went to the yaïlak, or summer pavilion on the Lake of the Ghost. Oh, wonderful,—a silvery world of pale-gilt suns and of moons so frail that the cloud-fleece at high-noon has more substance!"

Her voice died out; she sat gazing down at her spread fingers, on one of which gleamed her wedding-ring.

After a little, she went on dreamily:

"On that week, each three months, we were free. . . . If a young man should please us. . . ."

"Free?" he repeated.

"To love," she explained coolly.

"Oh." He nodded, but his face became rather grim.

"There came to me at the yaïlak," she went on carelessly, "one Khassar Noïane—Noïane means Prince—all in a surcoat of gold tissue with green vines embroidered, and wearing a green cap trimmed with dormouse, and green boots inlaid with stiff gold. . . .

"He was so young . . . a boy. I laughed. I said: 'Is this a Yaçaoul? An Urdu-envoy of Prince Erlik?'—mocking him as young and thoughtless girls mock—not in unfriendly manner—though I would not endure the touch of any man at all.

"And when I laughed at him, this Eighur boy flew into such a rage! Kai! I was amazed.

"'Sou-sou! Squirrel!' he cried angrily at me. 'Learn the Yacaz, little chatterer! Little mocker of men, it is ten blows with a stick you require, not kisses!'

"At that I whistled my two dogs, Bars and Alaga, for I did not think what he said was funny.

"I said to him: 'You had better go home, Khassar Noïane, for if no man has ever pleased me where I am at liberty to please myself, here on the Lake of the Ghost, then be very certain that no boy can please Keuke-Mongol here or anywhere!'

"And at that—kai! What did he say—that monkey?" She looked at her husband, her splendid eyes ablaze with wrathful laughter, and made a gesture full of angry grace:

"'Squirrel!' he cries—'little malignant sorceress of Yian! May everything high about you become a sandstorm, and everything long a serpent, and everything broad a toad, and everything——'

"But I had had enough, Victor," she added excitedly, "and I made a wild bee bite him on the lip! *What* do you think of such a courtship?" she cried, laughing. But Cleves's face was a study in emotions.

And then, suddenly, the laughing mask seemed to slip from the bewitching features of Keuke Mongol; and there was Tressa Norne—Tressa Cleves

—disconcerted, paling a little as the memory of her impulsive confidence in this man beside her began to dawn on her more clearly.

"I—I'm sorry——" she faltered. . . . "You'll think me silly—think evil of me, perhaps——"

She looked into his troubled eyes, then suddenly she took her face into both hands and covered it, sitting very still.

"We'll go South together," he said in an uncertain voice. . . . "I hope you will try to think of me as a friend. . . . I'm just troubled because I am so anxious to understand you. That is all. . . . I'm—I'm troubled, too, because I am anxious that you should think well of me. Will you try, always?"

She nodded.

"I want to be your friend, always," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Cleves."

It was a strange spot he chose for Tressa—strange but lovely in its own unreal and rather spectral fashion—where a pearl-tinted mist veiled the St. Johns, and made exquisite ghosts of the palmettos, and softened the sun to a silver-gilt wafer pasted on a nacre sky.

It was a still country, where giant water-oaks towered, fantastic under their misty camouflage of moss, and swarming with small birds.

Among the trees the wood-ibis stole; without on the placid glass of the stream the eared grebe floated. There was no wind, no stirring of leaves, no sound save the muffled splash of silver mullet, the breathless whirr of a humming-bird, or the hushed rustle of lizards in the woods.

For Tressa this was the blessed balm that heals, —the balm of silence. And, for the first week, she slept most of the time, or lay in her hammock watching the swarms of small birds creeping and flitting amid the moss-draped labyrinths of the live-oaks at her very door.

It had been a little club house before the war, this bungalow on the St. Johns at Orchid Hammock. Its members had been few and wealthy; but some were dead in France and Flanders, and some still remained overseas, and others continued busy in the North.

And these two young people were quite alone there, save for a negro cook and a maid, and an aged negro kennel-master who wore a scarlet waistcoat and cords too large for his shrunken body, and who pottered, pottered through the fields all day, with his whip clasped behind his bent back and the pointers ranging wide, or plodding in at heel with red tongues lolling.

Twice Cleves went a little way for quail, using Benton's dogs; but even here in this remote spot he dared not move out of view of the little house where Tressa lay asleep.

So he picked up only a few brace of birds, and confined his sport to impaling too-familiar scorpions on the blade of his knife.

And all the while life remained unreal for him; his marriage seemed utterly unbelievable; he could not realise it, could not reconcile himself to conditions so incomprehensible.

Also, ever latent in his mind, was knowledge that made him restless—the knowledge that the young girl he had married had been in love with another man: Sanang.

And there were other thoughts—thoughts which had scarcely even taken the shape of questions.

One morning he came from his room and found Tressa on the veranda in her hammock. She had her moon-lute in her lap.

"You feel better—much better!" he said gaily, saluting her extended hand.

"Yes. Isn't this heavenly? I begin to believe it is life to me, this pearl-tinted world, and the scent of orange bloom and the stillness of paradise itself."

She gazed out over the ghostly river. Not a wing stirred its glassy surface.

"Is this dull for you?" she asked in a low voice.

"Not if you are contented, Tressa."

"You're so nice about it. Don't you think you might venture a day's real shooting?"

"No, I think I won't," he replied.

"On my account?"

"Well—yes."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's all right as long as you're getting rested. What is that instrument?"

"My moon-lute."

"Oh, is that what it's called?"

She nodded, touched the strings. He watched her exquisite hands.

"Shall I?" she inquired a little shyly.

"Go ahead. I'd like to hear it!"

"I haven't touched it in months—not since I was on the steamer." She sat up in her hammock and began to swing there; and played and sang while swinging in the flecked shadow of the orange bloom:

"Little Isle of Cispangou,
Isle of iris, isle of cherry,
Tell your tiny maidens merry
Clouds are looming over you!
La-ē-la!
La-ē-la!
All your ocean's but a ferry;
Ships are bringing death to you!
La-ē-lou!
La-ē-lou!

"Little Isle of Cispangou,
Half a thousand ships are sailing;
Captain Death commands each crew;
Lo! the ruddy moon is paling!
La-ē-la!
La-ē-la!
Clouds the dying moon are veiling,
Every cloud a shroud for you!
La-ē-lou!
La-ē-lou!"

"Cispangou," she explained, "is the very, very ancient name, among the Mongols, for Japan."

"It's not exactly a gay song," he said. "What's it about?"

"Oh, it's a very ancient song about the Mongol invasion of Japan. I know scores and scores of such songs."

She sang some other songs. Afterward she descended from the hammock and came and sat down beside him on the veranda steps.

"I wish I could amuse you," she said wistfully.

"Why do you think I'm bored, Tressa? I'm not at all."

But she only sighed, lightly, and gathered her knees in both arms.

"I don't know how young men in the Western world are entertained," she remarked presently.

"You don't have to entertain me," he said, smiling.

"I should be happy to, if I knew how."

"How are young men entertained in the Orient?"

"Oh, they like songs and stories. But I don't think you do."

He laughed in spite of himself.

"Do you really wish to entertain me?"

"I do," she said seriously.

"Then please perform some of those tricks of magic which you can do so amazingly well."

Her dawning smile faded a trifle. "I don't—I haven't——" She hesitated.

"You haven't your professional paraphernalia with you," he suggested.

"Oh—as for that——"

"Don't you need it?"

"For some things—some kinds of things. . . . I *could* do—other things——"

He waited. She seemed disconcerted. "Don't do anything you don't wish to do, Tressa," he said.

"I was only—only afraid—that if I should do some little things to amuse you, I might stir—stir up—interfere—encounter some sinister current—and betray myself—betray my whereabouts——"

"Well, for heaven's sake don't venture then!" he said with emphasis. "Don't do anything to stir up any other wireless—any Yezidee——"

"I am wondering," she reflected, "just what I dare venture to do to amuse you."

"Don't bother about me. I wouldn't have you try any psychic stunt down here, and run the chance of stirring up some Asiatic devil somewhere!"

She nodded absently, occupied with her own thoughts, sitting there, chin on hand, her musing eyes intensely blue.

"I think I can amuse you," she concluded, "without bringing any harm to myself."

"Don't try it, Tressa!——"

"I'll be very careful. Now, sit quite still—closer to me, please."

He edged closer; and became conscious of an indefinable freshness in the air that enveloped him, like the scent of something young and growing. But it was no magic odour,—merely the virginal scent of her hair and skin that even clung to her summer gown.

He heard her singing under her breath to herself:

"La-ē-la!
"La-ē-la!"

and murmuring caressingly in an unknown tongue.

Then, suddenly in the pale sunshine, scores of little birds came hovering around them, alighting all over them. And he saw them swarming out of the mossy festoons of the water-oaks—scores and scores of tiny birds—Parula warblers, mostly—all flitting fearlessly down to alight upon his shoulders and knees, all keeping up their sweet, dreamy little twittering sound.

"This is wonderful," he whispered.

The girl laughed, took several birds on her forefinger.

"This is nothing," she said. "If I only dared—wait a moment!——" And, to the Parula warblers: "Go home, little friends of God!"

The air was filled with the musical whisper of wings. She passed her right arm around her husband's neck.

"Look at the river," she said.

"Good God!" he blurted out. And sat dumb.

For, over the St. John's misty surface, there was the span of a bridge—a strange, marble bridge humped up high in the centre.

And over it were passing thousands of people—he could make them out vaguely—see them passing in two never-ending streams—tinted shapes on the marble bridge.

And now, on the farther shore of the river, he was aware of a city—a vast one, with spectral pagoda shapes against the sky——

Her arm tightened around his neck.

He saw boats on the river—like the grotesque shapes that decorate ancient lacquer.

She rested her face lightly against his cheek.

In his ears was a far confusion of voices—the stir and movement of multitudes—noises on ships, boatmen's cries, the creak of oars.

Then, far and sonorous, quavering across the water from the city, the din of a temple gong.

There were bells, too—very sweet and silvery—camel bells, bells from the Buddhist temples.

He strained his eyes, and thought, amid the pagodas, that there were minarets, also.

Suddenly, clear and ringing came the distant muezzin's cry: "There is no other god but God! . . . It is noon. Mussulmans, pray!"

The girl's arm slipped from his neck and she shuddered and pushed him from her.

There was nothing, now, on the river or beyond it but the curtain of hanging mist; no sound except the cry of a gull, sharp and querulous in the vapours overhead.

"Have—have you been amused?" she asked.

"What did you do to me!" he demanded harshly.

She smiled and drew a light breath like a sigh.

"God knows what we living do to one another,—

or to ourselves," she said. "I only tried to amuse you—after taking counsel with the birds."

"What was that bridge I saw!"

"The Bridge of Ten Thousand Felicities."

"And the city?"

"Yian."

"You lived there?"

"Yes."

He moistened his dry lips and stole another glance at this very commonplace Florida river. Sky and water were blank and still, and the ghostly trees stood tall, reflected palely in the translucent tide.

"You merely made me visualise what you were thinking about," he concluded in a voice which still remained unsteady.

"Did you *hear* nothing?"

He was silent, remembering the bells and the enormous murmur of a living multitude.

"And—there were the birds, too." She added, with an uncertain smile: "I do not mean to worry you. . . . And you did ask me to amuse you."

"I don't know how you did it," he said harshly. "And the details—those thousands and thousands of people on the bridge! . . . And there was one, quite near this end of the bridge, who looked back. . . . A young girl who turned and laughed at us——"

"That was Yulun."

"Who?"

"Yulun. I taught her English."

"A temple girl?"

"Yes. From Black China."

"How could you make *me* see *her!*" he demanded.

"Why do you ask such things? I do not know how to tell you how I do it."

"It's a dangerous, uncanny knowledge!" he blurted out; and suddenly checked himself, for the girl's face went white.

"I don't mean uncanny," he hastened to add. "Because it seems to me that what you did by juggling with invisible currents to which, when attuned, our five senses respond, is on the same lines as the wireless telegraph and telephone."

She said nothing, but her colour slowly returned.

"You mustn't be so sensitive," he added. "I've no doubt that it's all quite normal—quite explicable on a perfectly scientific basis. Probably it's no more mysterious than a man in an airplane over midocean conversing with people ashore on two continents."

For the remainder of the day and evening Tressa seemed subdued—not restless, not nervous, but so quiet that, sometimes, glancing at her askance, Cleves involuntarily was reminded of some lithe young creature of the wilds, intensely alert and still, immersed in fixed and dangerous meditation.

About five in the afternoon they took their golf sticks, went down to the river, and embarked in the canoe.

The water was glassy and still. There was not a ripple ahead, save when a sleeping gull awoke and leisurely steered out of their way.

Tressa's arms and throat were bare and she wore no hat. She sat forward, wielding the bow paddle and singing to herself in a low voice.

"You feel all right, don't you?" he asked.

"Oh, I am so well, physically, now! It's really wonderful, Victor—like being a child again," she replied happily.

"You're not much more," he muttered.

She heard him: "Not very much more—in years," she said. . . . "Does Scripture tell us how old Our Lord was when He descended into Hell?"

"I don't know," he replied, startled.

After a little while Tressa tranquilly resumed her paddling and singing:

"—And eight tall towers
Guard the route
Of human life,
Where at all hours
Death looks out,
Holding a knife
Rolled in a shroud.

For every man,
Humble or proud,
Mighty or bowed,
Death has a shroud;—for every man,—
Even for Tchingniz Khan!
Behold them pass!—lancer,
Baroulass,
Temple dancer
In tissue gold,
Khiounnou,
Karlik bold,

Christian, Jew,—
Nations swarm to the great Urdu.
Yaçaoul, with your kettledrum,
Warn your Khan that his hour is come!
Shroud and knife at his spurred feet throw,
And bid him stretch his neck for the blow!—"

"You know," remarked Cleves, "that some of those songs you sing are devilish creepy."

Tressa looked around at him over her shoulder, saw he was smiling, smiled faintly in return.

They were off Orchid Cove now. The hotel and cottages loomed dimly in the silver mist. Voices came distinctly across the water. There were people on the golf course paralleling the river; laughter sounded from the clubhouse veranda.

They went ashore.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN IN WHITE

IT was at the sixth hole that they passed the man ahead who was playing all alone—a courteous young fellow in white flannels, who smiled and bowed them "through" in silence.

They thanked him, drove from the tee, and left the polite and reticent young man still apparently hunting for a lost ball.

Like other things which depended upon dexterity and precision, Tressa had taken most naturally to golf. Her supple muscles helped.

At the ninth hole they looked back but did not see the young man in white flannels.

Hammock, set with pine and palmetto, and intervals of evil-looking swamp, flanked the course. Rank wire-grass, bayberry and scrub palmetto bounded the fairgreen.

On every blossoming bush hung butterflies—Palomedes swallowtails—drugged with sparkle-berry honey, their gold and black velvet wings conspicuous in the sunny mist.

"Like the ceremonial vestments of a Yezidee executioner," murmured the girl. "The Tchortchas wear red when they robe to do a man to death."

"I wish you could forget those things," said Cleves.

"I am trying. . . . I wonder where that young man in white went."

Cleves searched the links. "I don't see him. Perhaps he had to go back for another ball."

"I wonder who he was," she mused.

"I don't remember seeing him before," said Cleves. . . . "Shall we start back?"

They walked slowly across the course toward the tenth hole.

Tressa teed up, drove low and straight. Cleves sliced, and they walked together into the scrub and towards the woods, where his ball had bounded into a bunch of palm trees.

Far in among the trees something white moved and vanished.

"Probably a white egret," he remarked, knocking about in the scrub with his midiron.

"It was that young man in white flannels," said Tressa in a low voice.

"What would he be doing in there?" he asked incredulously. "That's merely a jungle, Tressa—swamp and cypress, thorn and creeper,—and no man would go into that mess if he could. There is no bottom to those swamps."

"But I saw him in there," she said in a troubled voice.

"But when I tell you that only a wild animal or a snake or a bird could move in that jungle! The bog is one vast black quicksand. There's death in those depths."

"Victor."

"Yes?" He looked around at her. She was pale. He came up and took her hand inquiringly.

"I don't feel—well," she murmured. "I'm not ill, you understand——"

"What's the matter, Tressa?"

She shook her head drearily: "I don't know. . . . I wonder whether I should have tried to amuse you this morning——"

"You don't think you've stirred up any of those Yezidee beasts, do you?" he asked sharply.

And as she did not answer, he asked again whether she was afraid that what she had done that morning might have had any occult consequences. And he reminded her that she had hesitated to venture anything on that account.

His voice, in spite of him, betrayed great nervousness now, and he saw apprehension in her eyes, also.

"Why should that man in white have followed us, keeping out of sight in the woods?" he went on. "Did you notice about him anything to disturb you, Tressa?"

"Not at the time. But—it's odd—I can't put him out of my mind. Since we passed him and left him apparently hunting a lost ball, I have not been able to put him out of my mind."

"He seemed civil and well bred. He was perfectly good-humoured—all courtesy and smiles."

"I think—perhaps—it was the way he smiled at us," murmured the girl. "Everybody in the East smiles when they draw a knife. . . ."

He placed his arm through hers. "Aren't you a trifle morbid?" he said pleasantly.

She stooped for her golf ball, retaining a hold on his arm. He picked up his ball, too, put away her clubs and his, and they started back together in silence, evidently with no desire to make it eighteen holes.

"It's a confounded shame," he muttered, "just as you were becoming so rested and so delightfully well, to have anything—any unpleasant flash of memory cut in to upset you——"

"I brought it on myself. I should not have risked stirring up the sinister minds that were asleep."

"Hang it all!—and I asked you to amuse me."

"It was not wise in me," she said under her breath. "It is easy to disturb the unknown currents which enmesh the globe. I ought not to have shown you Yian. I ought not to have shown you Yulun. It was my fault for doing that. I was a little lonely, and I wanted to see Yulun."

They came down the river back to the canoe, threw in their golf bags, and embarked on the glassy stream.

Over the calm flood, stained deep with crimson, the canoe glided in the sanguine evening light. But

Tressa sang no more and her head was bent sideways as though listening—always listening—to something inaudible to Cleves—something very, very far away which she seemed to hear through the still drip of the paddles.

They were not yet in sight of their landing when she spoke to him, partly turning:

"I think some of your men have arrived."

"Where?" he asked, astonished.

"At the house."

"Why do you think so?"

"I think so."

They paddled a little faster. In a few minutes their dock came into view.

"It's funny," he said, "that you should think some of our men have arrived from the North. I don't see anybody on the dock."

"It's Mr. Recklow," she said in a low voice. "He is seated on our veranda."

As it was impossible to see the house, let alone the veranda, Cleves made no reply. He beached the canoe; Tressa stepped out; he followed, carrying the golf bags.

A mousy light lingered in the shrubbery; bats were flying against a salmon-tinted sky as they took the path homeward.

With an impulse quite involuntary, Cleves encircled his young wife's shoulders with his left arm.

"Girl-comrade," he said lightly, "I'd kill any man who even looked as though he'd harm you."

He smiled, but she had not missed the ugly undertone in his words.

They walked slowly, his arm around her shoulders. Suddenly he felt her start. They halted.

"What was it?" he whispered.

"I thought there was something white in the woods."

"Where, dear?" he asked coolly.

"Over there beyond the lawn."

What she called the "lawn" was only a vast sheet of pink and white phlox, now all misty with the whirring wings of sphinx-moths and Noctuidæ.

The oak grove beyond was dusky. Cleves could see nothing among the trees.

After a moment they went forward. His arm had fallen away from her shoulders.

There were no lights except in the kitchen when they came in sight of the house. At first nobody was visible on the screened veranda under the orange trees. But when he opened the swing door for her a shadowy figure arose from a chair.

It was John Recklow. He came forward, bent his strong white head, and kissed Tressa's hand.

"Is all well with you, Mrs. Cleves?"

"Yes. I am glad you came."

Cleves clasped the elder man's firm hand.

"I'm glad too, Recklow. You'll stop with us, of course."

"Do you really want me?"

"Of course," said Cleves.

"All right. I've a coon and a surrey behind your house."

So Cleves went around in the dusk and sent the outfit back to the hotel, and he himself carried in Recklow's suitcase.

Then Tressa went away to give instructions, and the two men were left together on the dusky veranda.

"Well?" said Recklow quietly.

Cleves went to him and rested both hands on his shoulders:

"I'm playing absolutely square. She's a perfectly fine girl and she'll have her chance some day, God willing."

"Her chance?" repeated Recklow.

"To marry whatever man she will some day care for."

"I see," said Recklow drily.

There was a silence, then:

"She's simply a splendid specimen of womanhood," said Cleves earnestly. "And intensely interesting to me. Why, Recklow, I haven't known a dull moment—though I fear she has known many——"

"Why?"

"Why? Well, being married to a—a sort of temporary figurehead—shut up here all day alone with a man of no particular interest to her——"

"Don't you interest her?"

"Well, how could I? She didn't choose me because she liked me particularly."

"Didn't she?" asked Recklow, still more drily. "Well, that does make it a trifle dull for you both."

"Not for me," said the younger man naïvely. "She is one of the most interesting women I ever met. And good heavens!—what psychic knowledge that child possesses! She did a thing to-day—merely to amuse me——" He checked himself and looked at Recklow out of sombre eyes.

"What did she do?" inquired the older man.

"I think I'll let her tell you—if she wishes. . . . And that reminds me. Why did you come down here, Recklow?"

"I want to show you something, Cleves. May we step into the house?"

They went into a little lamplit living-room. Recklow handed a newspaper clipping to Cleves: the latter read it, standing:

"HAD DEADLIEST GAS READY FOR GERMANS

" 'Lewisite' Might Have Killed Millions

"WASHINGTON, APRIL 24.—Guarded night and day and far out of human reach on a pedestal at the Interior Department Exposition here is a tiny vial. It contains a specimen of the deadliest poison ever known, 'Lewisite,' the product of an American scientist.

"Germany escaped this poison by signing the armistice before all the resources of the United States were turned upon her.

"Ten airplanes carrying 'Lewisite' would have wiped out, it is said, every vestige of life—animal and vegetable—in Berlin. A single day's output would snuff out the millions of lives on Manhattan Island. A drop poured in the palm of the hand would penetrate to the blood, reach the heart and kill the victim in agony.

"What was coming to Germany may be imagined by the fact that when the armistice was signed 'Lewisite' was being manufactured at the rate of ten tons a day. Three thousand tons of this most terrible instrument ever conceived for killing would have been ready for business on the American front in France on November 1.

" 'Lewisite' is another of the big secrets of the war just leaking out. It was developed in the Bureau of Mines by Professor W. Lee Lewis, of Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., who took a commission as a captain in the army.

"The poison was manufactured in a specially built plant near Cleveland, called the 'Mouse Trap,' because every workman who entered the stockade went under an agreement not to leave the eleven-acre space until the war was won. The object of this, of course, was to protect the secret.

"Work on the plant was started eighteen days after the Bureau of Mines had completed its experiments.

"Experts are certain that no one will want to steal the sample. Everybody at the Exposition, which shows what Secretary Lane's department is doing, keeps as far away from it as possible."

When Cleves had finished reading, he raised his eyes in silence.

"That vial was stolen a week ago," said Recklow gravely, "by a young man who killed one guard and fatally wounded the other."

"Was there any ante-mortem statement?"

"Yes. I've followed the man. I lost all trace of him at Palm Beach, but I picked it up again at Ormond. *And now I'm here,* Cleves."

"You don't mean you've traced him here!" exclaimed Cleves under his breath.

"He's here on the St. Johns River, somewhere. He came up in a motor-boat, but left it east of Orchard Cove. Benton knows this country. He's covering the motor-boat. And I—came here to see how you are getting on."

"And to warn us," added Cleves quietly.

"Well—yes. He's got that stuff. It's deadlier than the newspaper suspects. And I guess—I guess, Cleves, he's one of those damned Yezidee witch-doctors—or sorcerers, as they call them;—one of that sect of Assassins sent over here to work havoc on feeble minds and do murder on the side."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because the dirty beast lugs his shroud around with him—a bed-sheet stolen from the New Willard in Washington.

"We were so close to him in Jacksonville that we got it, and his luggage. But we didn't get him, the rat! God knows how he knew we were waiting for him in his room. He never came back to get his luggage.

"But he stole a bed-sheet from his hotel in St.

Augustine, and that is how we picked him up again. Then, at Palm Beach, we lost the beggar, but somehow or other I felt it in my bones that he was after you—you and your wife. So I sent Benton to Ormond and I went to Palatka. Benton picked up his trail. It led toward you—toward the St. Johns. And the reptile has been here forty-eight hours, trying to nose you out, I suppose——"

Tressa came into the room. Both men looked at her.

Cleves said in a guarded voice:

"To-day, on the golf links at Orchard Cove, there was a young man in white flannels—very polite and courteous to us—but—Tressa thought she saw him slinking through the woods as though following and watching us."

"My man, probably," said Recklow. He turned quietly to Tressa and sketched for her the substance of what he had just told Cleves.

"The man in white flannels on the golf links," said Cleves, "was well built and rather handsome, and not more than twenty-five. I thought he was a Jew."

"I thought so too," said Tressa, calmly, "until I saw him in the woods. And then—and then—suddenly it came to me that his smile was the smile of a treacherous Shaman sorcerer.

". . . And the idea haunts me—the memory of those smooth-faced, smiling men in white—men who smile only when they slay—when they slay body and soul under the iris skies of Yian!—O God, merciful, long suffering," she whispered, staring into the East, "deliver our souls from Satan who was stoned, and our bodies from the snare of the Yezidee!"

CHAPTER IX

THE WEST WIND

THE night grew sweet with the scent of orange bloom, and all the perfumed darkness was vibrant with the feathery whirr of hawk-moths' wings.

Tressa had taken her moon-lute to the hammock, but her fingers rested motionless on the strings.

Cleves and Recklow, shoulder to shoulder, paced the moonlit path along the hedges of oleander and hibiscus which divided garden from jungle.

And they moved cautiously on the white-shell road, not too near the shadow line. For in the cypress swamp the bloated grey death was awake and watching under the moon; and in the scrub palmetto the diamond-dotted death moved lithely.

And somewhere within the dark evil of the jungle a man in white might be watching.

So Recklow's pistol swung lightly in his right hand and Cleves' weapon lay in his side-pocket, and they strolled leisurely around the drive and up and down the white-shell walks, passing Tressa at regular intervals, where she sat in her hammock with the moon-lute across her knees.

Once Cleves paused to place two pink hibiscus blossoms in her hair above her ears; and the girl smiled gravely at him in the light.

Again, pausing beside her hammock on one of their tours of the garden, Recklow said in a low voice: "If the beast would only show himself, Mrs. Cleves, we'd not miss him. Have you caught a glimpse of anything white in the woods?"

"Only the night mist rising from the branch and a white ibis stealing through it."

Cleves came nearer: "Do you think the Yezidee is in the woods watching us, Tressa?"

"Yes, he is there," she said calmly.

"You *know* it?"

"Yes."

Recklow stared at the woods. "We can't go in to hunt for him," he said. "That fellow would get us with his Lewisite gas before we could discover and destroy him."

"Suppose he waits for a west wind and squirts his gas in this direction?" whispered Cleves.

"There is no wind," said Tressa tranquilly. "He has been waiting for it, I think. The Yezidee is very patient. And he is a Shaman sorcerer."

"My God!" breathed Recklow. "What sort of hellish things has the Old World been dumping into America for the last fifty years? An ordinary anarchist is bad enough, but this new breed of devil—these Yezidees—this sect of Assassins——"

"Hush!" whispered Tressa.

All three listened to the great cat-owl howling from the jungle. But Tressa had heard another sound—the vague stir of leaves in the live-oaks. Was it a passing breeze? Was a night wind rising? She listened. But heard no brittle clatter from the palm-fronds.

"Victor," she said.

"Yes, Tressa."

"If a wind comes, we must hunt him. That will be necessary."

"Either we hunt him and get him, or he kills us here with his gas," said Recklow quietly.

"If the night wind comes," said Tressa, "we must hunt the darkness for the Yezidee." She spoke coolly.

"If he'd only show himself," muttered Recklow, staring into the darkness.

The girl picked up her lute, caught Cleves' worried eyes fixed on her, suddenly comprehended that his anxiety was on her account, and blushed brightly in the moonlight. And he saw her teeth catch at her underlip; saw her look up again at him, confused.

"If I dared leave you," he said, "I'd go into the hammock and start that reptile. This won't do—this standing pat while he comes to some deadly decision in the woods there."

"What else is there to do?" growled Recklow.

"Watch," said the girl. "Out-watch the Yezidee. If there is no night-wind he may tire of waiting. Then you must shoot fast—very, very fast and straight. But if the night-wind comes, then we must hunt him in darkness."

Recklow, pistol in hand, stood straight and sturdy in the moonlight, gazing fixedly at the forest. Cleves sat down at his wife's feet.

She touched her moon-lute tranquilly and sang in her childish voice:

"Ring, ring, Buddha bells,
Gilded gods are listening.
Swing, swing, lily bells,
In my garden glistening.
Now I hear the Shaman drum;
Now the scarlet horsemen come;
Ding-dong!
Ding-dong!
Through the chanting of the throng
Thunders now the temple gong.
Boom-boom!
Ding-dong!

"Let the gold gods listen!
In my garden; what care I
Where my lily bells hang mute!
Snowy-sweet they glisten
Where I'm singing to my lute.
In my garden; what care I
Who is dead and who shall die?
Let the gold gods save or slay
Scented lilies bloom in May.
Boom, boom, temple gong!
Ding-dong!
Ding-dong!"

"What are you singing?" whispered Cleves.

" 'The Bells of Yian.' "

"Is it old?"

"Of the 13th century. There were few Buddhist bells in Yian then. It is Lamaism that has destroyed the Mongols and that has permitted the creed of the Assassins to spread—the devil worhip of Erlik."

He looked at her, not understanding. And she, pale, slim prophetess, in the moonlight, gazed at him out of lost eyes—eyes which saw, perhaps, the bloody age of men when mankind took the devil by the throat and all Mount Alamout went up in smoking ruin; and the Eight Towers were dark as death and as silent before the blast of the silver clarions of Ghenghis Khan.

"Something is stirring in the forest," whispered Tressa, her fingers on her lips.

"Damnation," muttered Recklow, "it's the wind!"

They listened. Far in the forest they heard the clatter of palm-fronds. They waited. The ominous warning grew faint, then rose again,—a long, low rattle of palm-fronds which became a steady monotone.

"We hunt," said Recklow bluntly. "Come on!"

But the girl sprang from the hammock and caught her husband's arm and drew Recklow back from the hibiscus hedge.

"Use me," she said. "You could never find the Yezidee. Let me do the hunting; and then shoot very, very fast."

"We've got to take her," said Recklow. "We dare not leave her."

"I can't let her lead the way into those black woods," muttered Cleves.

"The wind is blowing in my face," insisted Recklow. "We'd better hurry."

Tressa laid one hand on her husband's arm.

"I can find the Yezidee, I think. You never could find him before he finds you! Victor, let me use my own *knowledge!* Let me find the way. Please let me lead! Please, Victor. Because, if you don't, I'm afraid we'll all die here in the garden where we stand."

Cleves cast a haggard glance at Recklow, then looked at his wife.

"All right," he said.

The girl opened the hedge gate. Both men followed with pistols lifted.

The moon silvered the forest. There was no mist, but a night-wind blew mournfully through palm and cypress, carrying with it the strange, disturbing pungency of the jungle—wild, unfamiliar perfumes,—the acrid aroma of swamp and rotting mould.

"What about snakes?" muttered Recklow, knee deep in wild phlox.

But there was a deadlier snake to find and destroy, somewhere in the blotched shadows of the forest.

The first sentinel trees were very near, now; and Tressa was running across a ghostly tangle, where once had been an orange grove, and where aged and dying citrus stumps rose stark amid the riot of encroaching jungle.

"She's circling to get the wind at our backs," breathed Recklow, running forward beside Cleves. "That's our only chance to kill the dirty rat—catch him with the wind at our backs!"

Once, traversing a dry hammock where streaks of moonlight alternated with velvet-black shadow a rattlesnake sprang his goblin alarm.

They could not locate the reptile. They shrank together and moved warily, chilled with fear.

Once, too, clear in the moonlight, the Grey Death reared up from bloated folds and stood swaying rhythmically in a horrible shadow dance before them. And Cleves threw one arm around his wife and crept past, giving death a wide berth there in the checkered moonlight.

Now, under foot, the dry hammock lay everywhere and the night wind blew on their backs.

Then Tressa turned and halted the two men with a gesture. And went to her husband where he stood in the palm forest, and laid her hands on his shoulders, looking him very wistfully in the eyes.

Under her searching gaze he seemed oddly to comprehend her appeal.

"You are going to use—to use your *knowledge,*" he said mechanically. "You are going to find the man in white."

"Yes."

"You are going to find him in a way we don't understand," he continued, dully.

"Yes. . . . You will not hold me in—in horror—will you?"

Recklow came up, making no sound on the spongy palm litter underfoot.

"Can you find this devil?" he whispered.

"I—think so."

"Does your super-instinct—finer sense—knowledge—whatever it is—give you any inkling as to his whereabouts, Mrs. Cleves?"

"I think he is here in this hammock. Only——" she turned again, with swift impulse, to her husband, "—only if you—if *you* do not hold me in—in horror—because of what I do——"

There was a silence; then:

"What are you about to do?" he asked hoarsely.

"Slay this man."

"We'll do that," said Cleves with a shudder. "Only show him to us and we'll shoot the dirty reptile to slivers——"

"Suppose we hit the jar of gas," said Recklow.

After a silence, Tressa said:

"I have got to give him back to Satan. There is no other way. I understood that from the first. He can not die by your pistols, though you shoot very fast and straight. No!"

After another silence, Recklow said:

"You had better find him before the wind changes. We hunt down wind or—we die here together."

She looked at her husband.

"Show him to us in your own way," he said, "and deal with him as he must be dealt with."

A gleam passed across her pale face and she tried to smile at her husband.

Then, turning down the hammock to the east, she walked noiselessly forward over the fibrous litter, the men on either side of her, their pistols poised.

They had halted on the edge of an open glade, ringed with young pines in fullest plumage.

Tressa was standing very straight and still in a strange, supple, agonised attitude, her left forearm across her eyes, her right hand clenched, her slender body slightly twisted to the left.

The men gazed pallidly at her with tense, set faces, knowing that the girl was in terrible mental conflict against another mind—a powerful, sinister mind which was seeking to grasp her thoughts and control them.

Minute after minute sped: the girl never moved, locked in her psychic duel with this other brutal mind,—beating back its terrible thought-waves which were attacking her, fighting for mental supremacy, struggling in silence with an unseen adversary whose mental dominance meant death.

Suddenly her cry rang out sharply in the moonlight, and then, all at once, a man in white stood there in the lustre of the moon—a young, graceful man dressed in white flannels and carrying on his right arm what seemed to be a long white cloak.

Instantly the girl was transformed from a living statue into a lithe, supple, lightly moving thing that passed swiftly to the west of the glade, keeping the young man in white facing the wind, which was blowing and tossing the plumy young pines.

"So it is *you,* young man, with whom I have been wrestling here under the moon of the only God!" she said in a strange little voice, all vibrant and metallic with menacing laughter.

"It is I, Keuke Mongol," replied the young man in white, tranquilly; yet his words came as though he were tired and out of breath, and the hand he raised to touch his small black moustache trembled as if from physical exhaustion.

"Yarghouz!" she exclaimed. "Why did I not know you there on the golf links, Assassin of the Seventh Tower? And why do you come here with your shroud over your arm and hidden under it, in your right hand, a flask full of death?"

He said, smiling:

"I come because you are to die, Heavenly-Azure Eyes. I bring you your shroud." And he moved warily westward around the open circle of young pines.

Instantly the girl flung her right arm straight upward.

"Yarghouz!"

"I hear thee, Heavenly Azure."

"Another step to the west and I shatter thy flask of gas."

"With what?" he demanded; but stood discreetly motionless.

"With what I grasp in an empty palm. Thou knowest, Yarghouz."

"I have heard," he said with smiling uncertainty, "but to hear of force that can be hurled out of an empty palm is one thing, and to see it and feel it is another. I think you lie, Heavenly Azure."

"So thought Gutchlug. And died of a yellow snake."

The young man seemed to reflect. Then he looked up at her in his frank, smiling way.

"Wilt thou listen, Heavenly Eyes?"

"I hear thee, Yarghouz."

"Listen then, Keuke Mongol. Take life from us as we offer it. Life is sweet. Erlik, like a spider, waits in darkness for lost souls that flutter to his net."

"You think my soul was lost there in the temple, Yarghouz?"

"Unutterably lost, little temple girl of Yian. Therefore, live. Take life as a gift!"

"Whose gift?"

"Sanang's."

"It is written," she said gravely, "that we belong to God and we return to him. Now then, Yezidee, do your duty as I do mine! Kai!"

At the sound of the formula always uttered by the sect of Assassins when about to do murder, the young man started and shrank back. The west wind blew fresh in his startled eyes.

"Sorceress," he said less firmly, "you leave your Yiort to come all alone into this forest and seek me. Why then have you come, if not to submit!—if not to take the gift of life—if not to turn away from your seducers who are hunting me, and who have corrupted you?"

"Yarghouz, I come to slay you," she said quietly.

Suddenly the man snarled at her, flung the shroud at her feet, and crept deliberately to the left.

"Be careful!" she cried sharply; "look what you're about! Stand still, son of a dog! May your mother bewail your death!"

Yarghouz edged toward the west, clasping in his right hand the flask of gas.

"Sorceress," he laughed, "a witch of Thibet prophesied with a drum that the three purities, the nine perfections, and the nine times nine felicities shall be lodged in him who slays the treacherous temple girl, Keuke Mongol! There is more magic in this bottle which I grasp than in thy mind and body. Heavenly Eyes! I pray God to be merciful to this soul I send to Erlik!"

All the time he was advancing, edging cautiously around the circle of little plumy pines; and already the wind struck his left cheek.

"Yarghouz Khan!" cried the girl in her clear voice. "Take up your shroud and repeat the fatha!"

"Backward!" laughed the young man, "—as do you, Keuke Mongol!"

"Heretic!" she retorted. "Do you also refuse to name the ten Imaums in your prayers? Dog! Toad! Spittle of Erlik! May all your cattle die and all your horses take the glanders and all your dogs the mange!"

"Silence, sorceress!" he shouted, pale with fear and fury. "Witch! Mud worm! May Erlik seize you! May your skin be covered with putrefying sores! May all the demons torment you! May God remember you in hell!"

"Yarghouz! Stand still!"

"Is your word then the Rampart of Gog and Magog, you young witch of Yian, that a Khan of the Seventh Tower need fear you!" he sneered, stealing stealthily westward through the feathery pines.

"I give thee thy last chance, Yarghouz Khan," she said in an excited voice that trembled. "Recite thy prayer naming the ten, because with their holy names upon thy lips thou mayest escape damnation. For I am here to slay thee, Yarghouz! Take up thy shroud and pray!"

The young man felt the west wind at the back of his left ear. Then he began to laugh.

"Heavenly Eyes," he said, "thy end is come—together with the two police who hide in the pines yonder behind thee! Behold the bottle magic of Yarghouz Khan!"

And he lifted the glass flask in the moonlight as though he were about to smash it at her feet.

Then a terrible thing occurred. The entire flask glowed red hot in his grasp; and the man screamed and strove convulsively to fling the bottle; but it stuck to his hand, melted into the smoking flesh.

Then he screamed again—or tried to—but his entire lower jaw came off and he stood there with the awful orifice gaping in the moonlight—stood, reeled a moment—and then—and *then*—his whole face slid off, leaving nothing but a bony mask out of which burst shriek after shriek——

Keuke Mongol had fainted dead away. Cleves took her into his arms.

Recklow, trembling and deathly white, went over to the thing that lay among the young pines and forced himself to bend over it.

The glass flask still stuck to one charred hand, but it was no longer hot. And Recklow rolled the unspeakable thing into the white shroud and pushed it into the swamp.

An evil ooze took it, slowly sucked it under and engulfed it. A few stinking bubbles broke.

Recklow went back to the little glade among the pines.

A young girl lay sobbing convulsively in her husband's arms, asking God's pardon and his for the justice she had done upon an enemy of all mankind.

CHAPTER X

AT THE RITZ

WHEN Victor Cleves telegraphed from St. Augustine to Washington that he and his wife were on their way North, and that they desired to see John Recklow as soon as they arrived, John Recklow remarked that he knew of no place as private as a public one. And he came on to New York and established himself at the Ritz, rather regally.

To dine with him that evening were two volunteer agents of the United States Secret Service, *ZB-303,* otherwise James Benton, a fashionable architect; and *XYL-371,* Alexander Selden, sometime junior partner in the house of Milwin, Selden & Co.

A single lamp was burning in the white-and-rose rococo room. Under its veiled glow these three men sat conversing in guarded voices over coffee and cigars, awaiting the advent of *53-6-26,* otherwise Victor Cleves, recently Professor of Ornithology at Cambridge; and his young wife, Tressa, known officially as *V-69.*

"Did the trip South do Mrs. Cleves any good?" inquired Benton.

"Some," said Recklow. "When Selden and I saw her she was getting better."

"I suppose that affair of Yarghouz upset her pretty thoroughly."

"Yes." Recklow tossed his cigar into the fireplace and produced a pipe. "Victor Cleves upsets her more," he remarked.

"Why?" asked Benton, astonished.

"She's beginning to fall in love with him and doesn't know what's the matter with her," replied the elder man drily. "Selden noticed it, too."

Benton looked immensely surprised. "I supposed," he said, "that she and Cleves considered the marriage to be merely a temporary necessity. I didn't imagine that they cared for each other."

"I don't suppose they did at first," said Selden. "But I think she's interested in Victor. And I don't see how he can help falling in love with her, because she's a very beautiful thing to gaze on, and a most engaging one to talk to."

"She's about the prettiest girl I ever saw," admitted Benton, "and about the cleverest. All the same——"

"All the same—*what?*"

"Well, Mrs. Cleves has her drawbacks, you know—as a real wife, I mean."

Recklow said: "There is a fixed idea in Cleves's head that Tressa Norne married him as a last resort, which is true. But he'll never believe she's changed her ideas in regard to him unless she herself enlightens him. And the girl is too shy to do that. Besides, she believes the same thing of him. There's a mess for you!"

Recklow filled his pipe carefully.

"In addition," he went on, "Mrs. Cleves has another and very terrible fixed idea in her charming head, and that is that she really did lose her soul among those damned Yezidees. She believes that Cleves, though kind to her, considers her merely as something uncanny—something to endure until this Yezidee campaign is ended and she is safe from assassination."

Benton said: "After all, and in spite of all her loveliness, I myself should not feel entirely comfortable with such a girl for a real wife."

"Why?" demanded Recklow.

"Well—good heavens, John!—those uncanny things she does—her rather terrifying psychic knowledge and ability—make a man more or less uneasy." He laughed without mirth.

"For example," he added, "I never was nervous in any physical crisis; but since I've met Tressa Norne—to be frank—I'm not any too comfortable in my mind when I remember Gutchlug and Sanang and Albert Feke and that dirty reptile Yarghouz—and when I recollect *how that girl dealt with them!* Good God, John, I'm not a coward, I hope, but that sort of thing worries me!"

Recklow lighted his pipe. He said: "In the Government's campaign against these eight foreigners who have begun a psychic campaign against the unsuspicious people of this decent Republic, with the purpose of surprising, overpowering and enslaving the minds of mankind by a misuse of psychic power, we agents of the Secret Service are slowly gaining the upper hand.

"In this battle of minds we are gaining a victory. But we are winning solely and alone through the psychic ability and the loyalty and courage of a young girl who, through tragedy of circumstances, spent the years of her girlhood in the infamous Yezidee temple at Yian, and who learned from the devil-worshipers themselves not only this so-called magic of the Mongol sorcerers, but also how to meet its psychic menace and defeat it."

He looked at Benton, shrugged:

"If you and if Cleves really feel the slightest repugnance toward the strange psychic ability of this brave and generous girl, I for one do not share it."

Benton reddened: "It isn't exactly repugnance——" But Recklow interrupted sharply:

"Do you realise, Benton, what she's already accomplished for us in our secret battle against Bolshevism?—against the very powers of hell itself, led by these Mongol sorcerers?

"Of the Eight Assassins—or Sheiks-el-Djebel—who came to the United States to wield the dreadful weapon of psychic power against the minds of our people, and to pervert them and destroy all civilisation,—of the Eight Chief Assassins of the Eight Towers, this girl already has discovered and identified four,—Sanang, Gutchlug, Albert Feke, and Yarghouz; and she has destroyed the last three."

He sat calmly enjoying his pipe for a few moments' silence, then:

"Five of this sect of Assassins remain—five sly, murderous, psychic adepts who call themselves sorcerers. Except for Prince Sanang, I do not know who these other four men may be. I haven't a notion. Nor have you. Nor do I believe that with all the resources of the United States Secret Service we ever should be able to discover these four Sheiks-el-Djebel except for the astounding spiritual courage and psychic experience of the young wife of Victor Cleves."

After a moment Selden nodded. "That is quite true," he said simply. "We are utterly helpless against unknown psychic forces. And I, for one, feel no repugnance toward what Mrs. Cleves has done for all mankind and in the name of God."

"She's a brave girl," muttered Benton, "but it's terrible to possess such knowledge and horrible to use it."

Recklow said: "The horror of it nearly killed the girl herself. Have you any idea how she must suffer by being forced to employ such terrific knowledge? by being driven to use it to combat this menace of hell? Can you imagine what this charming, sensitive, tragic young creature must feel when, with powers natural to her but unfamiliar to us, she destroys with her own mind and will-power demons in human shape who are about to destroy her?

"Talk of nerve! Talk of abnegation! Talk of perfect loyalty and courage! There is more than these in Tressa Cleves. There is that dauntless bravery which faces worse than physical death. Because the child still believes that her soul is damned for whatever happened to her in the Yezidee temple; and that when these Yezidees succeed in killing her body, Erlik will surely seize the soul that leaves it."

There was a knocking at the door. Benton got up and opened it. Victor Cleves came in with his young wife.

Tressa Cleves seemed to have grown since she had been away. Taller, a trifle paler, yet without even the subtlest hint of that charming maturity which the young and happily married woman invariably wears, her virginal allure now verged vaguely on the delicate edges of austerity.

Cleves, sunburnt and vigorous, looked older, somehow—far less boyish—and he seemed more silent than when, nearly seven months before, he had been assigned to the case of Tressa Norne.

Recklow, Selden and Benton greeted them warmly; to each in turn Tressa gave her narrow, sun-tanned hand. Recklow led her to a seat. A servant came with iced fruit juice and little cakes and cigarettes.

Conversation, aimless and general, fulfilling formalities, gradually ceased.

A full June moon stared through the open windows—searching for the traditional bride, perhaps—and its light silvered a pale and lovely figure that might possibly have passed for the pretty ghost of a bride, but not for any girl who had married because she was loved.

Recklow broke the momentary silence, bluntly:

"Have you anything to report, Cleves?"

The young fellow hesitated:

"My wife has, I believe."

The others turned to her. She seemed, for a moment, to shrink back in her chair, and, as her eyes involuntarily sought her husband, there was in them a vague and troubled appeal.

Cleves said in a sombre voice: "I need scarcely remind you how deeply distasteful this entire and accursed business is to my wife. But she is going to see it through, whatever the cost. And we four men understand something of what it has cost her—is costing her—in violence to her every instinct."

"We honour her the more," said Recklow quietly.

"We couldn't honour her too much," said Cleves.

A slight colour came into Tressa's face; she bent her head, but Recklow saw her eyes steal sideways toward her husband.

Still bowed a little in her chair, she seemed to reflect for a while concerning what she had to say; then, looking up at John Recklow:

"I saw Sanang."

"Good heavens! Where?" he demanded.

"I—don't—know."

Cleves, flushing with embarrassment, explained: "She saw him clairvoyantly. She was lying in the hammock. You remember I had a trained nurse for her after—what happened in Orchid Lodge."

Tressa looked miserably at Recklow,—dumbly, for a moment. Then her lips unclosed.

"I saw Prince Sanang," she repeated. "He was near the sea. There were rocks—cottages on cliffs—and very brilliant flowers in tiny, pocket-like gardens.

"Sanang was walking on the cliffs with another man. There were forests, inland."

"Do you know who the other man was?" asked Recklow gently.

"Yes. He was one of the Eight. I recognised him. When I was a girl he came once to the Temple of Yian, all alone, and spread his shroud on the pink marble steps. And we temple girls mocked him and threw stemless roses on the shroud, telling him they were human heads with which to grease his toug."

She became excited and sat up straighter in her chair, and her strange little laughter rippled like a rill among pebbles.

"I threw a big rose without a stem upon the shroud," she exclaimed, "and I cried out, 'Niaz!' which means, 'Courage,' and I mocked him, saying, 'Djamouk Khagan,' when he was only a Khan, of course; and I laughed and rubbed one finger against the other, crying out, 'Toug ia glachakho!' which means, 'The toug is anointed.' And which was very impudent of me, because Djamouk was a Sheik-el-Djebel and Khan of the Fifth Tower, and entitled to a toug and to eight men and a Toughtchi. And it is a grave offence to mock at the anointing of a toug."

She paused, breathless, her splendid azure eyes sparkling with the memory of that girlish mischief.

Then their brilliancy faded; she bit her lip and stole an uncertain glance at her husband.

And after a pause she explained in a very subdued voice that the "Iagla michi," or action of "greasing the toug," or standard, was done when a severed human head taken in battle was cast at the foot of the lance shaft stuck upright in the ground.

"You see," she said sadly, "we temple girls, being already damned, cared little what we said, even to such a terrible man as Djamouk Khan. And even had the ghost of old Tchinguiz Khagan himself come to the temple and looked at us out of his tawny eyes, I think we might have done something saucy."

Tressa's pretty face was spiritless, now; she leaned back in her armchair and they heard an unconscious sigh escape her.

"Ai-ya! Ai-ya!" she murmured to herself, "what crazy things we did on the rose-marble steps, Yulun and I, so long—so long ago."

Cleves got up and went over to stand beside his wife's chair.

"What happened is this," he said heavily. "During my wife's convalescence after that Yarghouz affair, she found herself, at a certain moment, clairvoyant. And she thought she saw—she *did* see—Sanang, and an Asiatic she recognised as being one of the chiefs of the Assassins sect, whose name is Djamouk.

"But, except that it was somewhere near the sea—some summer colony probably on the Atlantic coast—she does not know where this pair of jail-birds roost. And this is what we have come here to report."

Benton, politely appalled, tried not to look incredulous. But it was evident that Selden and Recklow had no doubts.

"Of course," said Recklow calmly, "the thing to do is for you and your wife to try to find this place she saw."

"Make a tour of all such ocean-side resorts until Mrs. Cleves recognises the place she saw," added Selden. And to Recklow he added: "I believe there are several perfectly genuine cases on record where clairvoyants have aided the police."

"Several authentic cases," said Recklow quietly. But Benton's face was a study.

Tressa looked up at her husband. He dropped his hand reassuringly on her shoulder and nodded with a slight smile.

"There—there was something else," she said with considerable hesitation—"something not quite in line of duty—perhaps——"

"It seems to concern Benton," added Cleves, smiling.

"What is it?" inquired Selden, smiling also as Benton's features froze to a mask.

"Let me tell you, first," interrupted Cleves, "that my wife's psychic ability and skill can make me visualise and actually see scenes and people which, God knows, I never before laid eyes upon, but which she has both seen and known.

"And one morning, in Florida, I asked her to do something strange—something of that sort to amuse me—and we were sitting on the steps of our cottage—you know, the old club-house at Orchid!—and the first I knew I saw, in the mist on the St. Johns, a Chinese bridge humped up over that very commonplace stream, and thousands of people passing over it,—and a city beyond—the town of Yian, Tressa tells me,—and I heard the Buddhist bells and the big temple gong and the noises in streets and on the water——"

He was becoming considerably excited at the memory, and his lean face reddened and he gesticulated as he spoke:

"It was astounding, Recklow! There was that bridge, and all those people moving over it; and the city beyond, and the boats and shipping, and the vast murmur of multitudes. . . . And then, there on the bridge crossing toward Yian, I saw a young girl, who turned and looked back at my wife and laughed."

"And I told him it was Yulun," said Tressa, simply.

"A playfellow of my wife's in Yian," explained Cleves. "But if she were really Chinese she didn't look like what are my own notions of a Chinese girl."

"Yulun came from Black China," said Mrs. Cleves. "I taught her English. I loved her dearly. I was her most intimate friend in Yian."

There ensued a silence, broken presently by Benton; and:

"Where do I appear in this?" he asked stiffly.

Tressa's smile was odd; she looked at Selden and said:

"When I was convalescent I was lonely. . . . I made *the effort* one evening. And I found Yulun. And again she was on a bridge. But she was dressed as I am. And the bridge was one of those great, horrible steel monsters that sprawl across the East River. And I was astonished, and I said, 'Yulun, darling, are you really here in America and in New York, or has a demon tangled the threads of thought to mock my mind in illness?'

"Then Yulun looked very sorrowfully at me and wrote in Arabic characters, in the air, the name of our enemy who once came to the Lake of Ghosts for love of her—Yaddin-ed-Din, Tougtchi to Djamouk the Fox. . . . And who went his way again amid our scornful laughter. . . . He is a demon. And he was tangling my thread of thought!"

Tressa became exceedingly animated once more. She rose and came swiftly to where Benton was standing.

"And what do you think!" she said eagerly. "I said to her, 'Yulun! Yulun! Will you *make the effort* and come to me if I *make the effort?* Will you come to me, beloved?' And Yulun made 'Yes,' with her lips."

After a silence: "But—where do I come in?" inquired Benton, stiffly fearful of such matters.

"You *came* in."

"I don't understand."

"You came in the door while Yulun and I were talking."

"When?"

"When you came to see me after I was better, and you and Mr. Selden were going North with Mr. Recklow. Don't you remember; I was lying in the hammock in the moonlight, and Victor told you I was asleep?"

"Yes, of course——"

"I was not asleep. I had *made the effort* and I was with Yulun. . . . I did not know you were standing beside my hammock in the moonlight until Yulun told me. . . . And *that* is what I am to tell you; Yulun saw you. . . . And Yulun has written it in Chinese, in Eighur characters and in Arabic,—tracing them with her forefinger in the air—that Yulun, loveliest in Yian, flame-slender and very white, has seen her heart, like a pink pearl afire, burning between your august hands."

"My hands!" exclaimed Benton, very red.

There fell an odd silence. Nobody laughed.

Tressa came nearer to Benton, wistful, uncertain, shy.

"Would you care to see Yulun?" she asked.

"Well—no," he said, startled. "I—I shall not deny that such things worry me a lot, Mrs. Cleves. I'm a—an Episcopalian."

The tension released, Selden was the first to laugh.

"There's no use blinking the truth," he said; "we're up against something absolutely new. Of course, it isn't magic. It can, of course, be explained by natural laws about which we happen to know nothing at present."

Recklow nodded. "What do we know about the human mind? It has been proven that no thought can originate within that mass of convoluted physical matter called the brain. It has been proven that *something outside* the brain originates thought and uses the brain as a vehicle to incubate it. What do we know about thought?"

Selden, much interested, sat cogitating and looking at Mrs. Cleves. But Benton, still flushed and evidently nervous, sat staring out of the window at the full moon, and twisting an unlighted cigarette to shreds.

"Why didn't you tell Benton when the thing occurred down there at Orchid Lodge, the night we called to say good-bye?" asked Selden, curiously.

Tressa gave him a distressed smile: "I was afraid he wouldn't believe me. And I was afraid that you and Mr. Recklow, even if you believed it, might not like—like me any the better for—for being clairvoyant."

Recklow came over, bent his handsome grey head, and kissed her hand.

"I never liked any woman better, nor respected any woman as deeply," he said. And, lifting his head, he saw tears sparkling in her eyes.

"My dear," he said in a low voice, and his firm hand closed over the slim fingers he had kissed.

Benton got up from his chair, went to the window, turned shortly and came over to Tressa.

"You're braver than I ever could learn to be," he said shortly. "I ask your pardon if I seem sceptical. I'm more worried than incredulous. There's something born in me—part of me—that shrinks from anything that upsets my orthodox belief in the future life. But—if you wish me to see this—this girl—Yulun—it's quite all right."

She said softly, and with gentle wonder: "I know of nothing that could upset your belief, Mr. Benton. There is only one God. And if Mahomet be His prophet, or if he be Lord Buddha, or if your Lord Christ be vice-regent to the Most High, I do not know. All I know is that God is God, and that He prevailed over Satan who was stoned. And that in Paradise is eternal life, and in hell demons hide where dwells Erlik, Prince of Darkness."

Benton, silent and secretly aghast at her theology, said nothing. Recklow pleasantly but seriously denied that Satan and his demons were actual and concrete creatures.

Again Cleves's hand fell lightly on his wife's shoulder, in a careless gesture of reassurance. And, to Benton, "No soul is ever lost," he said, calmly. "I don't exactly know how that agrees with your orthodoxy, Benton. But it is surely so."

"I don't know myself," said Benton. "I hope it's so." He looked at Tressa a moment and then blurted out: "Anyway, if ever there was a soul in God's keeping and guarded by His angels, it's your wife's!"

"That also is true," said Cleves quietly.

"By the way," remarked Recklow carelessly, "I've arranged to have you stop at the Ritz while you're in town, Mrs. Cleves. You and your husband are to occupy the apartment adjoining this. Where is your luggage, Victor?"

"In our apartment."

"That won't do," said Recklow decisively. "Telephone for it."

Cleves went to the telephone, but Recklow took the instrument out of his hand and called the number. The voice of one of his own agents answered.

Cleves was standing alone by the open window when Recklow hung up the telephone. Tressa, on the sofa, had been whispering with Benton. Selden, looking over the evening paper by the rose-shaded lamp, glanced up as Recklow went over to Cleves.

"Victor," he said, "your man has been murdered. His throat was cut; his head was severed completely. Your luggage has been ransacked and so has your apartment. Three of my men are in possession, and the local police seem to comprehend the necessity of keeping the matter out of the newspapers. What was in your baggage?"

"Nothing," said Cleves, ghastly pale.

"All right. We'll have your effects packed up again and brought over here. Are you going to tell your wife?"

Cleves, still deathly pale, cast a swift glance toward her. She sat on the sofa in animated conversation with Benton. She laughed once, and Benton smiled at what she was saying.

"Is there any need to tell her, Recklow?"

"Not for a while, anyway."

"All right. I suppose the Yezidees are responsible for this horrible business."

"Certainly. Your poor servant's head lay at the foot of a curtain-pole which had been placed upright between two chairs. On the pole were tied three tufts of hair from the dead man's head. The pole had been rubbed with blood."

"That's Mongol custom," muttered Cleves. "They made a toug and 'greased' it!—the murderous devils!"

"They did more. They left at the foot of your bed and at the foot of your wife's bed two white sheets. And a knife lay in the centre of each sheet. That, of course, is the symbol of the Sect of Assassins."

Cleves nodded. His body, as he leaned there on the window sill in the moonlight, trembled. But his face had grown dark with rage.

"If I could—could only get my hands on one of them," he whispered hoarsely.

"Be careful. Don't wear a face like that. Your wife is looking at us," murmured Recklow.

With an effort Cleves raised his head and smiled across the room at his wife.

"Our luggage will be sent over shortly," he said. "If you're tired, we'll say good-night."

So she rose and the three men came to make their adieux and pay their compliments and devoirs. Then, with a smile that seemed almost happy, she went into her own apartment on her husband's arm.

Cleves and his wife had connecting bedrooms and a sitting-room between. Here they paused for a moment before the always formal ceremony of leave-taking at night. There were roses on the centre table. Tressa dropped one hand on the table and bent over the flowers.

"They seem so friendly," she said under her breath.

He thought she meant that she found even in flowers a refuge from the solitude of a loveless marriage.

He said quietly: "I think you will find the world very friendly, if you wish." But she shook her head, looking at the roses.

Finally he said good-night and she extended her hand, and he took it formally.

Then their hands fell away. Tressa turned and went toward her bedroom. At the door she stopped, turned slowly.

"What shall I do about Yulun?" she asked.

"What is there to do? Yulun is in China."

"Yes, her body is."

"Do you mean that the rest of her—whatever it is—could come here?"

"Why, of course."

"So that Benton could see her?"

"Yes."

"Could he see her just as she is? Her face and figure—clothes and everything?"

"Yes."

"Would she seem real or like a ghost—spirit—whatever you choose to call such things?"

Tressa smiled. "She'd be exactly as real as you or I, Victor. She'd seem like anybody else."

"That's astonishing," he muttered. "Could Benton hear her speak?"

"Certainly."

"Talk to her?"

Tressa laughed: "Of course. If Yulun should *make the effort* she could leave her body as easily as she undresses herself. It is no more difficult to divest one's self of one's body than it is to put off one garment and put on another. . . . And, somehow, I think Yulun will do it to-night."

"Come *here?*"

"It would be like her." Tressa laughed. "Isn't it odd that she should have become so enamoured of Mr. Benton—just seeing him there in the moonlight that night at Orchid Lodge?"

For a moment the smile curved her lips, then the shadow fell again across her eyes, veiling them in that strange and lovely way which Cleves knew so well; and he looked into her impenetrable eyes in troubled silence.

"Victor," she said in a low voice, "were you afraid to tell me that your man had been murdered?"

After a moment: "You always know everything," he said unsteadily. "When did you learn it?"

"Just before Mr. Recklow told you."

"How did you learn it, Tressa?"

"I looked into our apartment."

"When?"

"While you were telephoning."

"You mean you looked into our rooms from *here?*"

"Yes, clairvoyantly."

"What did you see?"

"The Iaglamichi!" she said with a shudder. "Kai! The Toug of Djamouk is anointed at last!"

"Is that the beast of a Mongol who did this murder?"

"Djamouk and Prince Sanang planned it," she said, trembling a little. "But that butchery was Yaddin's work, I think. Kai! The work of Yaddin-ed-Din, Tougtchi to Djamouk the Fox!"

They stood confronting each other, the length of the sitting-room between them. And after the silence had lasted a full minute Cleves reddened and said: "I am going to sleep on the couch at the foot of your bed, Tressa."

His young wife reddened too.

He said: "This affair has thoroughly scared me. I can't let you sleep out of my sight."

"I am quite safe. And you would have an uncomfortable night," she murmured.

"Do you mind if I sleep on the couch, Tressa?"

"No."

"Will you call me when you are ready?"

"Yes."

She went into her bedroom and closed the door.

When he was ready he slipped a pistol into the pocket of his dressing-gown, belted it over his pyjamas, and walked into the sitting-room. His wife called him presently, and he went in. Her night-lamp was burning and she extended her hand to extinguish it.

"Could you sleep if it burns?" he asked bluntly.

"Yes."

"Then let it burn. This business has got on my nerves," he muttered.

They looked at each other in an expressionless way. Both really understood how useless was this symbol of protection—this man the girl called husband;—how utterly useless his physical strength, and the pistol sagging in the pocket of his dressing-gown. Both understood that the only real protection to be looked for must come from her—from the gifted and guardian mind of this young girl who lay there looking at him from the pillows.

"Good-night," he said, flushing; "I'll do my best. But only one of God's envoys, like you, knows how to do battle with things that come out of hell."

After a moment's silence she said in a colourless voice: "I wish you'd lie down on the bed."

"Had you rather I did?"

"Yes."

So he went slowly to the bed, placed his pistol under the pillow, drew his dressing-gown around him, and lay down.

After he had lain unstirring for half an hour: "Try to sleep, Tressa," he said, without turning his head.

"Can't you seem to sleep, Victor?" she asked. And he heard her turn her head.

"No."

"Shall I help you?"

"Do you mean use hypnosis—the power of suggestion—on me?"

"No. I can help you to sleep very gently. I can make you very drowsy. . . . You are drowsy now. . . . You are very close to the edge of sleep. . . . Sleep, dear. . . . Sleep, easily, naturally, confidently as a tired boy. . . . You are sleeping, . . . deeply . . . sweetly . . . my dear . . . my dear, dear husband."

CHAPTER XI

YULUN THE BELOVED

CLEVES opened his eyes. He was lying on his left side. In the pink glow of the night-lamp he saw his wife in her night-dress, seated sideways on the farther edge of the bed, talking to a young girl.

The strange girl wore what appeared to be a chamber-robe of frail gold tissue that clung to her body and glittered as she moved. He had never before seen such a dress; but he had seen the girl; he recognised her instantly as the girl he had seen turn to look back at Tressa as she crossed the phantom bridge over that misty Florida river. And Cleves comprehended that he was looking at Yulun.

But this charming young thing was no ghost, no astral projection. This girl was warm, living, breathing flesh. The delicate scent of her strange garments and of her hair, her very breath, was in the air of the room. Her half-hushed but laughing voice was deliciously human; her delicate little hands, caressing Tressa's, were too eagerly real to doubt.

Both talked at the same time, their animated voices mingling in the breathless delight of the reunion. Their exclamations, enchanting laughter, bubbling chatter, filled his ears. But not one word of what they were saying to each other could he understand.

Suddenly Tressa looked over her shoulder and met his astonished eyes.

"Tokhta!" she exclaimed. "Yulun! My lord is awake!"

Yulun swung around swiftly on the edge of the bed and looked laughingly at Cleves. But when her red lips unclosed she spoke to Tressa: and, "Darling," she said in English, "I think your dear lord remembers that he saw me on the Bridge of Dreams. And heard the bells of Yian across the mist."

Tressa said, laughing at her husband: "This is Yulun, flame-slender, very white, loveliest in Yian. On the rose-marble steps of the Yezidee Temple she flung a stemless rose upon Djamouk's shroud, where he had spread it like a patch of snow in the sun.

"And at the Lake of the Ghosts, where there is freedom to love, for those who desire love, came Yaddin, Tougtchi to Djamouk the Fox, in search of love—and Yulun, flame-slim, and flower-white. . . . Tell my dear lord, Yulun!"

Yulun laughed at Cleves out of her dark eyes that slanted charmingly at the corners.

"Kai!" she cried softly, clapping her palms. "I took his roses and tore them with my hands till their petals rained on him and their golden hearts were a powdery cloud floating across the water.

"I said: 'Even the damned do not mate with demons, my Tougtchi! So go to the devil, my Banneret, and may Erlik seize you!' "

Cleves, his ears ringing with the sweet confusion of their girlish laughter, rose from his pillow, supporting himself on one arm.

"You are Yulun. You are alive and real——" He looked at Tressa: "She is real, isn't she?" And, to Yulun: "Where do you come from?"

The girl replied seriously: "I come from Yian." She turned to Tressa with a dazzling smile: "Thou knowest, my heart's gold, how it was I came. Tell thy dear lord in thine own way, so that it shall be simple for his understanding. . . . And now—because my visit is ending—I think thy dear lord should sleep. Bid him sleep, my heart's gold!"

At that calm suggestion Cleves sat upright on the bed,—or attempted to. But sank back gently on his pillow and met there a dark, delicious rush of drowsiness.

He made an effort—or tried to: the smooth, sweet tide of sleep swept over him to the eyelids, leaving him still and breathing evenly on his pillow.

The two girls leaned over and looked down at him.

"Thy dear lord," murmured Yulun. "Does he love thee, rosebud of Yian?"

"No," said Tressa, under her breath.

"Does he know thou art damned, heart of gold?"

"He says no soul is ever really harmed," whispered Tressa.

"Kai! Has he never heard of the Slayer of Souls?" exclaimed Yulun incredulously.

"My lord maintains that neither the Assassin of Khorassan nor the Sheiks-el-Djebel of the Eight Towers, nor their dark prince Erlik, can have power over God to slay the human soul."

"Tokhta, Rose of Yian! Our souls were slain there in the Yezidee temple."

Tressa looked down at Cleves:

"My dear lord says no," she said under her breath.

"And—Sanang?"

Tressa paled: "His mind and mine did battle. I tore my heart from his grasp. I have laid it, bleeding, at my dear lord's feet. Let God judge between us, Yulun."

"There was a day," whispered Yulun, "when Prince Sanang went to the Lake of the Ghosts."

Tressa, very pallid, looked down at her sleeping husband. She said:

"Prince Sanang came to the Lake of the Ghosts. The snow of the cherry-trees covered the young world.

"The water was clear as sunlight; and the lake was afire with scarlet carp . . . Yulun—beloved—the nightingale sang all night long—all night long . . . Then I saw Sanang shining, all gold, in the moonlight . . . May God remember him in hell!"

"May God remember him."

"Sanang Noïane. May he be accursed in the Namaz Ga!"

"May he be tormented in Jehaunum!—Sanang, Slayer of Souls."

Tressa leaned forward on the bed, stretched herself out, and laid her face gently across her husband's feet, touching them with her lips.

Then she straightened herself and sat up, supported by one hand, and looking silently down at the sleeping man.

"No soul shall die," she said. "Niaz!"

"Is it written?" asked Yulun, surprised.

"My lord has said it."

"Allahou Ekber," murmured Yulun; "thy lord is only a man."

Tressa said: "Neither the Tekbir nor the fatha, nor the warning of Khidr, nor the Yacaz of the Khagan, nor even the prayers of the Ten Imaums are of any value to me unless my dear lord confirms the truth of them with his own lips."

"And Erlik? Is he nothing, then?"

"Erlik!" repeated Tressa insolently. "Who is Erlik but the servant of Satan who was stoned?"

Her beautiful, angry lips were suddenly distorted; her blue eyes blazed. Then she spat, her mouth still tremulous with hatred. She said in a voice shaking with rage:

"Yulun, beloved! Listen attentively. I have slain two of the Slayers of the Eight Towers. With God's help I shall slay them all—all!—Djamouk, Yaddin, Arrak Sou-Sou—all!—every one!—Tiyang Khan, Togrul,—all shall I slay, even to the last one among them!"

"Sanang, also?"

"I leave him to God. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!"

Yulun calmly paraphrased the cant phrase of the Assassins: "For it is written that we belong to God and we return to Him. Heart of gold, I shall execute my duty!"

Then Yulun slipped from the edge of the bed to the floor, and stood there looking oddly at Tressa, her eyes rain-bright as though choking back tears—or laughter.

"Heart of a rose," she said in a suppressed voice, "my time is nearly ended. . . . So. . . . I go to the chamber of this strange young man who holds my soul like a pearl afire between his hands. . . . I think it it written that I shall love him."

Tressa rose also and placed her lips close to Yulun's ear: "His name, beloved, is Benton. His room is on this floor. Shall we *make the effort* together?"

"Yes," said Yulun. "Lay your body down upon the bed beside your lord who sleeps so deeply. . . . And now stretch out. . . . And fold both hands. . . . And now put off thy body like a silken garment. . . . So! And leave it there beside thy lord, asleep."

They stood together for a moment, shining like dewy shapes of tall flowers, whispering and laughing together in the soft glow of the night lamp.

Cleves slept on, unstirring. There was the white and sleeping figure of his wife lying on the bed beside him.

But Tressa and Yulun were already melting away between the wall and the confused rosy radiance of the lamp.

Benton, in night attire and chamber-robe belted in, fresh from his bath and still drying his curly hair on a rough towel, wandered back into his bedroom.

When his short, bright hair was dry, he lighted a cigarette, took the automatic from his dresser, examined the clip, and shoved it under his pillow.

Then he picked up the little leather-bound Testament, seated himself, and opened it. And read tranquilly while his cigarette burned.

When he was ready he turned out the ceiling light, leaving only the night lamp lighted. Then he knelt beside his bed,—a custom surviving the nursery period,—and rested his forehead against his folded hands.

Then, as he prayed, something snapped the thread of prayer as though somebody had spoken aloud in the still room; and, like one who has been suddenly interrupted, he opened his eyes and looked around and upward.

The silent shock of her presence passed presently. He got up from his knees, looking at her all the while.

"You are Yulun," he said very calmly.

The girl flushed brightly and rested one hand on the foot of the bed.

"Do you remember in the moonlight where you walked along the hedge of white hibiscus and oleander—that night you said good-bye to Tressa in the South?"

"Yes."

"Twice," she said, laughing, "you stopped to peer at the blossoms in the moonlight."

"I thought I saw a face among them."

"You were not sure whether it was flowers or a girl's face looking at you from the blossoming hedge of white hibiscus," said Yulun.

"I know now," he said in an odd, still voice, unlike his own.

"Yes, it was I," she murmured. And of a sudden the girl dropped to her knees without a sound and laid her head on the velvet carpet at his feet.

So swiftly, noiselessly was it done that he had not comprehended—had not moved—when she sat upright, resting on her knees, and grasped the collar of her tunic with both gemmed hands.

"Have pity on me, lord of my lost soul!" she cried softly.

Benton stooped in a dazed way to lift the girl; but found himself knee deep in a snowy drift of white hibiscus blossoms—touched nothing but silken petals—waded in them as he stepped forward. And saw her standing before him still grasping the collar of her golden tunic.

A great white drift of bloom lay almost waist deep between them; the fragrance of oleander, too, was heavy in the room.

"There are years of life before the flaming gates of Jehaunum open. And I am very young," said Yulun wistfully.

Somebody else laughed in the room. Turning his head, he saw Tressa standing by the empty fireplace.

"What you see and hear need not disturb you," she said, looking at Benton out of brilliant eyes. "There is no god but God; and His prophet has been called by many names." And to Yulun: "Have I not told you that nothing can harm our souls?"

Yulun's expression altered and she turned to Benton: "Say it to me!" she pleaded.

As in a dream he heard his own words: "Nothing can ever really harm the soul."

Yulun's hands fell from her tunic collar. Very slowly she lifted her head, looking at him out of lovely, proud young eyes.

She said, evenly, her still gaze on him: "I am Yulun of the Temple. My heart is like a blazing pearl which you hold between your hands. May the four Blessed Companions witness the truth of what I say."

Then a delicate veil of colour wrapped her white skin from throat to temple; she looked at Benton with sudden and exquisite distress, frightened and ashamed at his silence.

In the intense stillness Benton moved toward her. Into his outstretched hands her two hands fell; but, bending above them, his lips touched only two white hibiscus flowers that lay fresh and dewy in his palms.

Bewildered, he straightened up; and saw the girl standing by the mantel beside Tressa, who had caught her by the left hand.

"Tokhta! Look out!" she said distinctly.

Suddenly he saw two men in the room, close to him—their broad faces, slanting eyes, and sparse beards thrust almost against his shoulder.

"Djamouk! Yaddin-ed-Din!" cried Tressa in a terrible voice. But quick as a flash Yulun tore a white sheet from the bed, flung it on the floor, and, whipping a tiny, jewelled knife from her sleeve, threw it glittering upon the sheet at the feet of the two men.

"One shroud for two souls!" she said breathlessly. "—and a knife like that to sever them from their bodies!"

The two men sprang backward as the sheet touched their feet, and now they stood there as though confounded.

"Djamouk, Kahn of the Fifth Tower!" cried Tressa in a clear voice, "you have put off your body like a threadbare cloak, and your form that stands there is only your mind! And it is only the evil will of Yaddin in the shape of his body that confronts us in this room of a man you have doomed!"

Yulun, intent as a young leopardess on her prey, moved soundlessly toward Yaddin.

"Tougtchi!" she said coldly, "you did murder this day, my Banneret, and the Toug of Djamouk has been greased. Now look out for yourself!"

"Don't stir!" came Tressa's warning voice, as Benton snatched his pistol from the pillow. "Don't fire! Those men have no real substance! For God's sake don't fire! I tell you they have no bodies!"

Suddenly something—some force—flung Benton on the bed. The two men did not seem to touch him at all, but he lay there struggling, crushed, held by something that was strangling him.

Through his swimming eyes he saw Yaddin trying to drive a long nail into his skull with a hammer,—felt the piercing agony of the first crashing blow,—struggled upright, drenched in blood, his ears ringing with the screaming of Yaddin.

Then, there in the little rococo bedroom of the Ritz-Carlton, began a strange and horrible struggle—the more dreadful because the struggle was not physical and the combatants never touched each other—scarcely moved at all.

Yaddin, still screaming, confronted Yulun. The girl's eyes were ablaze, her lips parted with the violence of her breathing. And Yaddin writhed and screamed under the terrible concentration of her gaze, his inferior but ferocious mind locked with her mind in deadly battle.

The girl said slowly, showing a glimmer of white teeth: "Your will to do evil to my young lord is breaking, Yaddin-ed-Din. . . . I am breaking it. The nail and hammer were but symbols. It was your brain that brooded murder—that willed he should die as though shattered by lightning when that blood-vessel burst in his brain!"

"Sorceress!" shrieked Yaddin, "what are you doing to my heart, where my body lies asleep in a berth on the Montreal Express!"

"Your heart is weak, Yaddin. Soon the valves shall fail. A negro porter shall discover you dead in your berth, my Banneret!"

The man's swarthy face became livid with the terrific mental battle.

"Let me go back to my body!" he panted. "What are you doing to me that I can not go back? I will go back! I wish it!—I——"

"Let us go back and rejoin our bodies!" cried Djamouk in an agonised voice. "There are teeth in my throat, deep in my throat, biting and tearing out the cords."

"Cancer," said Tressa calmly. "Your body shall die of it while your soul stumbles on through darkness."

"My Tougtchi!" shouted Djamouk, "I hear my soul bidding my body farewell! I must go before my mind expires in the terrible gaze of this young sorceress!"

He turned, drifted like something misty to the solid wall.

"My soul be ransom for yours!" cried Yulun to Tressa. "Bar that man's path to life!"

Tressa flung out her right hand and, with her forefinger, drew a barrier through space, bar above bar.

And Benton, half swooning on his bed, saw a cage of terrible and living light penning in Djamouk, who beat upon the incandescent bars and grasped them and clawed his way about, squealing like a tortured rat in a red-hot cage.

Through the deafening tumult Yulun's voice cut like a sword:

"Their bodies are dying, Heart of a Rose! . . . Listen! I hear their souls bidding their minds farewell!"

And, after a dreadful silence: "The train speeding north carries two dead men! God is God. Niaz!"

The bars of living fire faded. Two cinder-like and shapeless shadows floated and eddied like whitened ashes stirred by a wind on the hearth; then drifted through the lamp-light, fading, dissolving, lost gradually in thin air.

Tressa, leaning back against the mantel, covered her face with both hands.

Yulun crept to the bed where Benton lay, breathing evenly in deepest sleep.

With the sheer sleeve of her tunic she wiped the blood from his face. And, at her touch, the wound in the temple closed and the short, bright hair dried and curled over a forehead as clean and fresh as a boy's.

Then Yulun laid her lips against his, rested so a moment.

"Seek me, dear lord," she whispered. "Or send me a sign and I shall come."

And, after a pause, she said, her lips scarcely stirring: "Love me. My heart is a flaming pearl burning between your hands."

Then she lifted her head.

But Tressa had rejoined her body, where it lay asleep beside her deeply sleeping husband.

So Yulun stood a moment, her eyes remote. Then, after a while, the little rococo bedroom in the Ritz-Carlton was empty save for a young man asleep on the bed, holding in his clenched hand a white hibiscus blossom.

CHAPTER XII

HIS EXCELLENCY

HIS EXCELLENCY PRESIDENT TINTINTO, Chief Executive of one of the newer and cruder republics, visiting New York incognito with his Secretaries of War and of the Navy, had sent for John Recklow. And now the reception was in full operation.

Recklow was explaining. "In the beginning," he said, "the Bolsheviks' aim was to destroy everything and everybody except themselves, and then to reorganise for their own benefit what was left of a wrecked world. That was their programme——"

"Quite a programme," interrupted the Secretary of War, with something that almost resembled a giggle. But his prominent eyes continued to stare at Recklow untouched by the mirth which stretched his large, silly mouth.

The face of the Secretary of the Navy resembled the countenance of a benevolent manatee. The visage of the President was a study in tinted chalks.

Recklow said: "To combat that sort of Bolshevism was a business that we of the United States Secret Service understood—or supposed we understood.

"Then, suddenly, out of unknown Mongolia and into the civilised world stepped eight men."

"Yezidees," said the President mechanically. "Your Government has sent me a very full report."

"Yezidees of the Sect of the Assassins," continued Recklow; "—the most ancient sect in the world surviving from ancient times—the Sorcerers of Asia. And, as it was in ancient times, so it is now: the Yezidees are devil worshipers; their god is Satan; *his* prophet is Erlik, Prince of Darkness; *his* regent on earth is the old man of Mount Alamout; and to this ancient and sinister title a Yezidee sorcerer called Prince Sanang, or Sanang Noïane, has succeeded.

"His murderous deputies were the Eight Khans of the Eight Towers. Four of these assassins are dead—Gutchlug, Yarghouz, Djamouk the Fox, and Yaddin-ed-Din. One is in prison charged with murder,—Albert Feke.

"Four of the sorcerers remain alive: Tiyang Khan, Togrul, Arrak, Sou-Sou, called The Squirrel, and the Old Man of the Mountain himself, Saï-Sanang, Prince of the Yezidees."

Recklow paused; the pop-eyes of the War Secretary were upon him; the benevolent manatee gazed mildly at him; the countenance of the President seemed more like a Rocky Mountain goat than ever—chiselled out of a block of tinted chalk.

Recklow said: "To the menace of Bolshevism, which endangers this Republic and yours, has been added a more terrible threat—the threat of powerful and evil minds made formidable by psychic knowledge.

"For these Yezidee Sorcerers are determined to conquer, seize, and subdue the minds of mankind. They are here for that frightful purpose. Powerfully, terrifically equipped to surprise and capture the unarmed minds of our people, enslave their very thoughts and use them to their own purposes, these Sorcerers of the Yezidees assumed control of the Bolsheviki, who were merely envious and ferocious bandits, but whose crippled minds are now utterly enslaved by these Assassins from Asia.

"And this is what the United States Secret Service has to combat. And its weapons are not warrants, not pistols. For in this awful battle between decency and evil, it is mind against mind in an occult death grapple. And our only weapon against these minds made powerful by psychic knowledge and made terrible by an esoteric ability akin to what is called black magic,—our only weapon is the mind of a young girl."

"I understand," said the President, "that she became an adept in occult practices while imprisoned in the Yezidee Temple of Erlik at Yian."

Recklow looked into the President's face, which had grown very pale.

"Yes, sir," he said. "God alone knows what this child learned in the Yezidee Temple. All I know is that with this knowledge she has met the Yezidees in a battle of minds, has halted them, confounded them, fought them with their own occult knowledge, and has slain four of them."

The intense silence was broken by the frivolous titter of the Secretary of War:

"Of course I don't believe any of this supernatural stuff," he said with the split grin which did not modify his protruding stare. "This girl is merely a clever detective, that is the gist of the matter. And I don't believe anything else."

"Perhaps, sir, you will believe this, then," said John Recklow quietly. "I cut it from the *Times* this morning." And he handed the clipping to the Secretary of War.

NEW PLOT IN EAST

Moslem and Hindu Conspirators
Have Formed Secret
Organisation

Have World Revolution in View

Think to Rouse Asia, America, and Africa
to Outbreaks by Their
Propaganda.

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Special Cable to *The New York Times.*

July 1.—A significant event has recently taken place. Under the name of the Oriental League has recently been established a central organisation uniting all the various secret societies of Moslem and Hindu nationalists. The aim of the new association is to prepare for joint revolutionary action in Asia, America, and Africa.

The effects of this vast conspiracy may already be traced in recent events in Egypt, India, and Afghanistan. For the first time, through the creation of this league, the racial and religious differences which have divided Eastern conspirators have been overcome. The Ottoman League, founded by Mahmud Muktar Pasha, Munir Pasha, and Ahmed Rechid Bey, has adhered to the new organisation. So have the extreme Egyptian nationalists and the Hindu revolutionary group, "Pro India," emissaries of which were recently sentenced for bringing bombs into Switzerland during the war at the instigation of the German General Staff.

At a "Constituent Assembly" of the league, which took place in Yian, there were present, besides Young Turks, Egyptians and Hindus, delegates representing Persia, Afghanistan, Algeria, Morocco, and Mongolia.

The league is of Mongolian origin. Its leading spirit is a certain Prince Sanang, of whom little is known.

Associated with this mischievous and rather mysterious Mongolian personage are three better known criminals, now fugitives from justice—Talaat, Enver, and Djemal. It is to Enver Pasha's talent for intrigue that the union between Moslems and Hindus, the most striking and dangerous feature of the movement, is chiefly due.

Considerable funds are at the disposal of the league. These are partly supplied from Germany. Besides enjoying the support of the Germans, the league is also in close touch with Lenine, who very soon after his advent to power organised an Oriental Department in Moscow.

The alliance between the league and the Russian Bolsheviki was brought about by the notorious German Socialist agent, "Parvus," who is now in Switzerland. Many weeks ago he conferred with the Soviet rulers in Moscow, whence he went to Afghanistan, hoping to reorganise the new Amir's army and establish lines of communication for propaganda in India.

Evidence exists that the recent insurrection in Egypt, the sudden attack of the Afghans, and the rising in India, remarkable for co-operation between Moslems and Hindus, were connected with the activities of the league.

The Secretary looked up after he finished the reading.

"I don't see anything about Black Magic in this?" he remarked flippantly.

Recklow's features became very grave.

"I think," he said, "that everybody—myself included—and, with all respect, even yourself, sir,—and your honourable colleague,—and perhaps even his Excellency your President,—should be on perpetual guard over their minds, and the thoughts that range there, lest, surreptitiously, stealthily, some taint of Yezidee infection lodge there and take root—and spread—perhaps—throughout your new Republic."

The Secretary of War grinned. "They say I'm something of a socialist already," he chuckled. "Do you think your magic Yezidees are responsible?"

The President, troubled and pallid, gazed steadily at Recklow.

"Mine is a single-track mind," he remarked as though to himself.

Recklow said nothing. It is one kind of mind, after all. However, single-track roads are now obsolete.

"A single-track mind," repeated the President. "And—I should not like anything to happen to the switch. It would mean ditching—or a rusty siding at best. . . . Please do all that is possible to get those four Yezidees, Mr. Recklow."

Recklow said calmly: "Our only hope is in this young girl, Tressa Norne, who is now Mrs. Cleves."

"My conscience!" piped the Secretary of the Navy. "What would happen to us if these Yezidees should murder her?"

"God knows," replied John Recklow, unsmiling.

"Why not put her aboard our new dreadnought?" suggested the Secretary, "and keep her cruising until you United States Secret Service fellows get the rest of these infernal Yezidees and clap 'em into jail?"

"We can do nothing without her," said Recklow sombrely.

There was a painful silence. The President joined his finger tips and stared palely into space.

"May I not say," he suggested, "that I think it a vital necessity that these Yezidees be caught and destroyed before they do any damage to the minds of myself and my cabinet?"

"God grant it, sir," said Recklow grimly.

"Mine," murmured the President, "is a single-track mind. I should be very much annoyed if anybody tampered with the rails—very much annoyed indeed, Mr. Recklow."

"They mustn't murder that girl," said the Secretary of the Navy. "Do you need any Marines, Mr. Recklow? Why not ask your Government for a few?"

Recklow rose: "Mr. President," he said, "I shall not deny that my Government is very deeply disturbed by this situation. In the beginning, these eight Assassins, and Sanang, came here for the purpose of attacking, overpowering, and enslaving the minds of the people of the United States and of the South American Republics.

"But now, after four of their infamous colleagues have been destroyed, the ferocious survivors, thoroughly alarmed, have turned their every energy toward accomplishing the death of Mrs. Cleves! Why, sir, scarcely a day passes but that some attempt upon her life is made by these Yezidees.

"Scarcely a day passes that this young girl is not suddenly summoned to defend her mind as well as her body against the occult attacks of these Mongol Sorcerers. Yes, sir, Sorcerers!" repeated Recklow, his calm voice deep with controlled passion, "—whatever your honourable Secretary of War may think about it!"

His cold, grey eyes measured the President as he stood there.

"Mr. President, I am at my wits' end to protect her from assassination! Her husband is always with her—Victor Cleves, sir, of our Secret Service. But wherever he takes her these devils follow and send their emissaries to watch her, to follow, to attempt her mental destruction or her physical death.

"There is no end to their stealthy cunning, to their devilish devices, to their hellish ingenuity!

"And all we can do is to guard her person from the approach of strangers, and stand ready, physically, to aid her.

"She is our only barrier—*your* only defence—between civilisation and horrors worse than Bolshevism.

"I believe, Mr. President, that civilisation in North and South America—in your own Republic as well as in ours—depends, literally, upon the safety of Tressa Cleves. For, if the Yezidees kill her, then I do not see what is to save civilisation from utter disintegration and total destruction."

There was a silence. Recklow was not certain that the President had been listening.

His Excellency sat with finger tips joined, gazing pallidly into space; and Recklow heard him murmuring under his breath and all to himself, as though to fix the deathless thought forever in his brain:

"May I not say that mine is a single-track mind? May I not say it? May I not,—may I not,—not, not, not——"

CHAPTER XIII

SA-N'SA

JUNE sunshine poured through the window of his bedroom in the Ritz; and Cleves had just finished dressing when he heard his wife's voice in the adjoining sitting-room.

He had not supposed that Tressa was awake. He hastened to tie his tie and pull on a smoking jacket, listening all the while to his wife's modulated but gay young voice.

Then he opened the sitting-room door and went in. And found his wife entirely alone.

She looked up at him, her lips still parted as though checked in what she had been saying, the smile still visible in her blue eyes.

"Who on earth are you talking to?" he asked, his bewildered glance sweeping the sunny room again.

She did not reply; her smile faded as a spot of sunlight wanes, veiled by a cloud—yet a glimmer of it remained in her gaze as he came over to her.

"I thought they'd brought our breakfast," he said, "—hearing your voice. . . . Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, Victor."

He seated himself, and his perplexed scrutiny included her frail morning robe of China silk, her lovely bare arms, and her splendid hair twisted up and pegged down with a jade dagger. Around her bare throat and shoulders, too, was a magnificent necklace of imperial jade which he had never before seen; and on one slim, white finger a superb jade ring.

"By Jove!" he said, "you're very exotic this morning, Tressa. I never before saw that negligee effect."

The girl laughed, glanced at her ring, lifted a frail silken fold and examined the amazing embroidery.

"I wore it at the Lake of the Ghosts," she said.

The name of that place always chilled him. He had begun to hate it, perhaps because of all that he did not know about it—about his wife's strange girlhood—about Yian and the devil's Temple there—and about Sanang.

He said coldly but politely that the robe was unusual and the jade very wonderful.

The alteration in his voice and expression did not escape her. It meant merely masculine jealousy, but Tressa never dreamed he cared in that way.

Breakfast was brought, served; and presently these two young people were busy with their melons, coffee, and toast in the sunny room high above the softened racket of traffic echoing through avenue and street below.

"Recklow telephoned me this morning," he remarked.

She looked up, her face serious.

"Recklow says that Yezidee mischief is taking visible shape. The Socialist Party is going to be split into bits and a new party, impudently and publicly announcing itself as the Communist Party of America, is being organised. Did you ever hear of anything as shameless—as outrageous—in this Republic?"

She said very quietly: "Sanang has taken prisoner the minds of these wretched people. He and his remaining Yezidees are giving battle to the unarmed minds of our American people."

"Gutchlug is dead," said Cleves, "—and Yarghouz and Djamouk, and Yaddin."

"But Tiyang Khan is alive, and Togrul, and that cunning demon Arrak Sou-Sou, called The Squirrel," she said. She bent her head, considering the jade ring on her finger. "—And Prince Sanang," she added in a low voice.

"Why didn't you let me shoot him when I had the chance?" said Cleves harshly.

So abrupt was his question, so rough his sudden manner, that the girl looked up in dismayed surprise. Then a deep colour stained her face.

"Once," she said, "Prince Sanang held my heart prisoner—as Erlik held my soul. . . . I told you that."

"Is that the reason you gave the fellow a chance?"

"Yes."

"Oh. . . . And possibly you gave Sanang a chance because he still holds your—affections!"

She said, crimson with the pain of the accusation: "I tore my heart out of his keeping. . . . I told you that. . . . And, believing—trying to believe what you say to me, I have tried to tear my soul out of the claws of Erlik. . . . Why are you angry?"

"I don't know. . . . I'm not angry. . . . The whole horrible situation is breaking my nerve, I guess. . . . With whom were you talking before I came in?"

After a silence the girl's smile glimmered.

"I'm afraid you won't like it if I tell you."

"Why not?"

"You—such things perplex and worry you. . . . I am afraid you won't like me any the better if I tell you who it was I had been talking with."

His intent gaze never left her. "I want you to tell me," he repeated.

"I—I was talking with Sa-n'sa," she faltered.

"With whom?"

"With Sa-n'sa. . . . We called her Sansa."

"Who the dickens is Sansa?"

"We were three comrades at the Temple," she said timidly, "—Yulun, Sansa, and myself. We loved each other. We always went to the Lake of the Ghosts together—for protection——"

"Go on!"

"Sansa was a girl of the Aroulads, born at Buldak —as was Temujin. The night she was born three moon-rainbows made circles around her Yaïlak. The Baroulass horsemen saw this and prayed loudly in their saddles. Then they galloped to Yian and came crawling on their bellies to Sanang Noïane with the news of the miracle. And Sanang came with a thousand riders in leather armour. And, 'What is this child's name?' he shouted, riding into the Yaïlak with his black banners flapping around him like devil's wings.

"A poor Manggoud came out of the tent of skins, carrying the new born infant, and touched his head to Sanang's stirrup. 'This babe is called Tchagane,' he said, trembling all over. 'No!' cries Sanang, 'she is called Sansa. Give her to me and may Erlik seize you!'

"And he took the baby on his saddle in front of him and struck his spurs deep; and so came Sansa to Yian under a roaring rustle of black silk banners. . . . It is so written in the Book of Iron. . . . Allahou Ekber."

Cleves had leaned his elbow on the table, his forehead rested in his palm.

Perhaps he was striving in a bewildered way to reconcile such occult and amazing things with the year 1920—with the commonplace and noisy city of New York—with this pretty, modern, sunlit sitting-room in the Ritz-Carlton on Madison Avenue—with this girl in her morning negligee opposite, her coffee and melon fragrant at her elbow, her wonderful blue eyes resting on him.

"Sansa," he repeated slowly, as though striving to grasp even a single word from the confusion of names and phrases that were sounding still in his ears like the vibration of distant and unfamiliar seas.

"Is this the girl you were talking with just now?

In—in *this* room?" he added, striving to understand.

"Yes."

"She wasn't here, of course."

"Her body was not."

"Oh!"

Tressa said in her sweet, humorous way: "You must try to accustom yourself to such things, Victor. You know that Yulun talks to me. . . . I wanted to talk to Sansa. The longing awakened me. So—*I made the effort.*"

"And she came—I mean the part of her which is not her body."

"Yes, she came. We talked very happily while I was bathing and dressing. Then we came in here. She is such a darling!"

"Where is she?"

"In Yian, feeding her silk-worms and making a garden. You see, Sansa is quite wealthy now, because when the Japanese came she filled a bullock cart with great lumps of spongy gold from the Temple and filled another cart with Yu-stone, and took the Hezar of Baroulass horsemen on guard at the Lake of the Ghosts. And with this Keutch, riding a Soubz horse, and dressed like an Urieng lancer, my pretty little comrade Tchagane, who is called Sansa, marched north preceded by two kettle-drums and a toug with two tails——"

Tressa's clear laughter checked her; she clapped her hands, breathless with mirth at the picture she evoked.

"Kai!" she laughed; "what adorable impudence has Sansa! Neither Tchortcha nor Khiounnou dared ask her who were her seven ancestors! No! And when her caravan came to the lovely Yliang river, my darling Sansa rode out and grasped the lance from her Tougtchi and drove the point deep into the fertile soil, crying in a clear voice: 'A place for Tchagane and her people! Make room for the toug!'

"Then her Manggoud, who carried the spare steel tip for her lance, got out of his saddle and, gathering a handful of mulberry leaves, rubbed the shaft of the lance till it was all pale green.

" 'Toug iaglachakho!' cries my adorable Sansa! 'Build me here my Urdu! *—my Mocalla! ** And upon it pitch my tent of skins!"

Again Tressa's laughter checked her, and she strove to control it with the jade ring pressed to her lips.

"Oh, Victor," she added in a stifled voice, looking at him out of eyes full of mischief, "you don't realise how funny it was—Sansa and her toug and her Urdu—Oh, Allah!—the bones of Tchinguiz must have rattled in his tomb!"

Her infectious laughter evoked a responsive but perplexed smile from Cleves; but it was the smile of a bewildered man who has comprehended very little of an involved jest; and he looked around at the modern room as though to find his bearings.

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* Urdu = An imperial encampment.
** Mocalla = A platform used as a Moslem pulpit.

Suddenly Tressa leaned forward swiftly and laid one hand on his.

"You don't think all this is very funny. You don't like it," she said in soft concern.

"It isn't that, Tressa. But this is New York City in the year 1920. And I can't—I absolutely can not get into touch—hook up, mentally, with such things —with the unreal Oriental life that is so familiar to you."

She nodded sympathetically: "I know. You feel like a Mergued Pagan from Lake Baïkal when all the lamps are lighted in the Mosque;—like a camel driver with his jade and gold when he enters Yarkand at sunrise."

"Probably I feel like that," said Cleves, laughing outright. "I take your word, dear, anyway."

But he took more; he picked up her soft hand where it still rested on his, pressed it, and instantly reddened because he had done it. And Tressa's bright flush responded so quickly that neither of them understood, and both misunderstood.

The girl rose with heightened colour, not knowing why she stood up or what she meant to do. And Cleves, misinterpreting her emotion as a silent rebuke to the invasion of that convention tacitly accepted between them, stood up, too, and began to speak carelessly of commonplace things.

She made the effort to reply, scarcely knowing what she was saying, so violently had his caress disturbed her heart,—and she was still speaking when their telephone rang.

Cleves went; listened, then, still listening, summoned Tressa to his side with a gesture.

"It's Selden," he said in a low voice. "He says he has the Yezidee Arrak Sou-Sou under observation, and that he needs you desperately. Will you help us?"

"I'll go, of course," she replied, turning quite pale.

Cleves nodded, still listening. After a while: "All right. We'll be there. Good-bye," he said sharply; and hung up.

Then he turned and looked at his wife.

"I wish to God," he muttered, "that this business were ended. I—I can't bear to have you go."

"I am not afraid. . . . Where is it?"

"I never heard of the place before. We're to meet Selden at 'Fool's Acre.' "

"Where is it, Victor?"

"I don't know. Selden says there are no roads, —not even a spotted trail. It's a wilderness left practically blank by the Geological Survey. Only the contours are marked, and Selden tells me that the altitudes are erroneous and the unnamed lakes and water courses are all wrong. He says it is his absolute conviction that the Geological Survey never penetrated this wilderness at all, but merely skirted it and guessed at what lay inside, because the map he has from Washington is utterly misleading, and the entire region is left blank except for a few vague blue lines and spots indicating water, and a few heights marked '1800.' "

He turned and began to pace the sitting-room, frowning, perplexed, undecided.

"Selden tells me," he said, "that the Yezidee, Arrak Sou-Sou, is in there and very busy doing something or other. He says that he can do nothing without you, and will explain why when we meet him."

"Yes, Victor."

Cleves turned on his heel and came over to where his wife stood beside the sunny window.

"I hate to ask you to go. I know that was the understanding. But this incessant danger—your constant peril——"

"That does not count when I think of my country's peril," she said in a quiet voice. "When are we to start? And what shall I pack in my trunk?"

"Dear child," he said with a brusque laugh, "it's a wilderness and we carry what we need on our backs. Selden meets us at a place called Glenwild, on the edge of this wilderness, and we follow him in on our two legs."

He glanced across at the mantel clock.

"If you'll dress," he said nervously, "we'll go to some shop that outfits sportsmen for the North. Because, if we can, we ought to leave on the one o'clock train."

She smiled; came up to him. "Don't worry about me," she said. "Because I also am nervous and tired; and I mean to make an end of every Yezidee remaining in America."

"Sanang, too?"

They both flushed deeply.

She said in a steady voice: "Between God and Erlik there is a black gulf where a million million stars hang, lighting a million million other worlds.

"Prince Sanang's star glimmers there. It is a sun, called Yramid. And it lights the planet, Yu-tsung. Let him reign there between God and Erlik."

"You will slay this man?"

"God forbid!" she said, shuddering. "But I shall send him to his own star. Let my soul be ransom for his! And may Allah judge between us—between this man and me."

Then, in the still, sunny room, the girl turned to face the East. And her husband saw her lips move as though speaking, but heard no sound.

"What on earth are you saying there, all to yourself?" he demanded at last.

She turned her head and looked at him across her left shoulder.

"I asked Sansa to help me. . . . And she says she will."

Cleves nodded in a dazed way. Then he opened a window and leaned there in the sunshine, looking down into Madison Avenue. And the roar of traffic seemed to soothe his nerves.

But "Good heavens!" he thought; "do such things really go on in New York in 1920! Is the entire world becoming a little crazy? Am I really in my right mind when I believe that the girl I married is talking, without wireless, to another girl in China!"

He leaned there heavily, gazing down into the street with sombre eyes.

"What a ghastly thing these Yezidees are trying to do to the world—these Assassins of men's minds!" he thought, turning away toward the door of his bedroom.

As he crossed the threshold he stumbled, and looking down saw that he had tripped over a white sheet lying there. For a moment he thought it was a sheet from his own bed, and he started to pick it up. Then he saw the naked blade of a knife at his feet.

With an uncontrollable shudder he stepped out of the shroud and stood staring at the knife as though it were a snake. It had a curved blade and a bone hilt coarsely inlaid with Arabic characters in brass.

The shroud was a threadbare affair—perhaps a bed-sheet from some cheap lodging house. But its significance was so repulsive that he hesitated to touch it.

However, he was ashamed to have it discovered in his room. He picked up the brutal-looking knife and kicked the shroud out into the corridor, where they could guess if they liked how such a rag got into the Ritz-Carlton.

Then he searched his bedroom, and, of course, discovered nobody hiding. But chills crawled on his spine while he was about it, and he shivered still as he stood in the centre of the room examining the knife and testing edge and point.

Then, close to his ear, a low voice whispered:

"Be careful, my lord; the Yezidee knife is poisoned. But it is written that a poisoned heart is more dangerous still."

He had turned like a flash; and he saw, between him and the sitting-room door, a very young girl with slightly slanting eyes, and rose and ivory features as perfect as though moulded out of tinted bisque.

She wore a loose blue linen robe, belted in, short at the elbows and skirt, showing two creamy-skinned arms and two bare feet in straw sandals. In one hand she had a spray of purple mulberries, and she looked coolly at Cleves and ate a berry or two.

"Give me the knife," she said calmly.

He handed it to her; she wiped it with a mulberry leaf and slipped it through her girdle.

"I am Sansa," she said with a friendly glance at him, busy with her fruit.

Cleves strove to speak naturally, but his voice trembled.

"Is it you—I mean your real self—your own body?"

"It's my real self. Yes. But my body is asleep in my mulberry grove."

"In—in China?"

"Yes," she said calmly, detaching another mulberry and eating it. A few fresh leaves fell on the centre table.

Sansa chose another berry. "You know," she said, "that I came to Tressa this morning,—to my little Heart of Fire I came when she called me. And

I was quite sleepy, too. But I heard her, though there was a night wind in the mulberry trees, and the river made a silvery roaring noise in the dark. . . . And now I must go. But I shall come again very soon."

She smiled shyly and held out her lovely little hand, "—As Tressa tells me is your custom in America," she said, "I offer you a good-bye."

He took her hand and found it a warm, smooth thing of life and pulse.

"Why," he stammered in his astonishment, "you *are* real! You are not a ghost!"

"Yes, I am real," she answered, surprised, "but I'm not in my body,—if you mean that." Then she laughed and withdrew her hand, and, going, made him a friendly gesture.

"Cherish, my lord, my darling Heart of Fire. Serpents twist and twine. So do rose vines. May their petals make your path of velvet and sweet scented. May everything that is round be a pomegranate for you two to share; may everything that sways be lilies bordering a path wide enough for two. In the name of the Most Merciful God, may the only cry you hear be the first sweet wail of your first-born. And when the tenth shall be born, may you and Heart of Fire bewail your fate because both of you desire more children!"

She was laughing when she disappeared. Cleves thought she was still there, so radiant the sunshine, so sweet the scent in the room.

But the golden shadow by the door was empty of her. If she had slipped through the doorway he had not noticed her departure. Yet she was no longer there. And, when he understood, he turned back into the empty room, quivering all over. Suddenly a terrible need of Tressa assailed him—an imperative necessity to speak to her—hear her voice.

"Tressa!" he called, and rested his hand on the centre table, feeling weak and shaken to the knees. Then he looked down and saw the mulberry leaves lying scattered there, tender and green and still dewy with the dew of China.

"Oh, my God!" he whispered, "such things *are!* It isn't my mind that has gone wrong. There *are* such things!"

The conviction swept him like a tide till his senses swam. As though peering through a mist of gold he saw his wife enter and come to him;—felt her arm about him, sustaining him where he swayed slightly with one hand on the table among the mulberry leaves.

"Ah," murmured Tressa, noticing the green leaves, "she oughtn't to have done that. That was thoughtless of her, to show herself to you."

Cleves looked at her in a dazed way. "The body is nothing," he muttered. "The rest only is real. That is the truth, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I seem to be beginning to believe it. . . . Sansa said things—I shall try to tell you—some day—dear. . . . I'm so glad to hear your voice."

"Are you?" she murmured.

"And so glad to feel your touch. . . . I found a shroud on my threshold. And a knife."

"The Yezidees are becoming mountebanks. . . . Where is the knife?" she asked scornfully.

"Sansa said it was poisoned. She took it. She—she said that a poisoned heart is more dangerous still."

Then Tressa threw up her head and called softly into space: "Sansa! Little Silk-Moth! What are these mischievous things you have told to my lord?"

She stood silent, listening. And, in the answer which he could not hear, there seemed to be something that set his young wife's cheeks aflame.

"Sansa! Little devil!" she cried, exasperated. "May Erlik send his imps to pinch you if you have said to my lord these shameful things. It was impudent! It was mischievous! You cover me with shame and confusion, and I am humbled in the dust of my lord's feet!"

Cleves looked at her, but she could not sustain his gaze.

"Did Sansa say to you what she said to me?" he demanded unsteadily.

"Yes. . . . I ask your pardon. . . . And I had already *told* her you did not—did not—were not in—in love—with me. . . . I ask your pardon."

"Ask more. . . . Ask your heart whether it would care to hear that I am in love. And with whom. Ask your heart if it could ever care to listen to what my heart could say to it."

"Y-yes—I'll ask—my heart," she faltered. . . .

"I think I had better finish dressing——" She lifted her eyes, gave him a breathless smile as he caught her hand and kissed it.

"It—it would be very wonderful," she stammered, "—if our necessity should be-become our choice."

But that speech seemed to scare her and she fled, leaving her husband standing tense and upright in the middle of the room.

Their train on the New York Central Railroad left the Grand Central Terminal at one in the afternoon.

Cleves had made his arrangements by wire. They travelled lightly, carrying, except for the clothing they wore, only camping equipment for two.

It was raining in the Hudson valley; they rushed through the outlying towns and Po'keepsie in a summer downpour.

At Hudson the rain slackened. A golden mist enveloped Albany, through which the beautiful tower and façades along the river loomed, masking the huge and clumsy Capitol and the spires beyond.

At Schenectady, rifts overhead revealed glimpses of blue. At Amsterdam, where they descended from the train, the flag on the arsenal across the Mohawk flickered brilliantly in the sunny wind.

By telegraphic arrangement, behind the station waited a touring car driven by a trooper of State Constabulary, who, with his comrade, saluted smartly as Cleves and Tressa came up.

There was a brief, low-voiced conversation. Their camping outfit was stowed aboard, Tressa sprang into the tonneau followed by Cleves, and the car started swiftly up the inclined roadway, turned to the right across the railroad bridge, across the trolley tracks, and straight on up the steep hill paved with blocks of granite.

On the level road which traversed the ridge at last they speeded up, whizzed past the great hedged farm where racing horses are bred, rushing through the afternoon sunshine through the old-time Scotch settlements which once were outposts of the old New York frontier.

Nine miles out the macadam road ended. They veered to the left over a dirt road, through two hamlets; then turned to the right.

The landscape became rougher. To their left lay the long, low Maxon hills; behind them the Mayfield range stretched northward into the open jaws of the Adirondacks.

All around them were woods, now. Once a Gate House appeared ahead; and beyond it they crossed four bridges over a foaming, tumbling creek where Cleves caught glimpses of shadowy forms in amber-tinted pools—big yellow trout that sank unhurriedly out of sight among huge submerged boulders wet with spray.

The State trooper beside the chauffeur turned to Cleves, his purple tie whipping in the wind.

"Yonder is Glenwild, sir," he said.

It was a single house on the flank of a heavily forested hill. Deep below to the left the creek leaped two cataracts and went flashing out through a belt of cleared territory ablaze with late sunshine.

The car swung into the farm-yard, past the barn on the right, and continued on up a very rough trail.

"This is the road to the Ireland Vlaie," said the trooper. "It is possible for cars for another mile only."

Splendid spruce, pine, oak, maple, and hemlock fringed the swampy, uneven trail which was no more than a wide, rough vista cut through the forest.

And, as the trooper had said, a little more than a mile farther the trail became a tangle of bushes and swale; the car slowed down and stopped; and a man rose from where he was seated on a mossy log and came forward, his rifle balanced across the hollow of his left arm.

The man was Alek Selden.

It was long after dark and they were still travelling through pathless woods by the aid of their electric torches.

There was little underbrush; the forest of spruce and hemlock was first growth.

Cleves shined the trees but could discover no blazing, no trodden path.

In explanation, Selden said briefly that he had hunted the territory for years.

"But I don't begin to know it," he added. "There are vast and ugly regions of bog and swale where a sea of alders stretches to the horizon. There are desolate wastes of cat-briers and witch-hopple under leprous tangles of grey birches, where stealthy little brooks darkle deep under matted débris. Only wild things can travel such country.

"Then there are strange, slow-flowing creeks in the perpetual shadows of tamarack woods, where many a man has gone in never to come out."

"Why?" asked Tressa.

"Under the tender carpet of green cresses are shining black bogs set with tussock; and under the bog stretches quicksand,—and death."

"Do you know these places?" asked Cleves.

"No."

Cleves stepped forward to Tressa's side.

"Keep flashing the ground," he said harshly. "I don't want you to step into some hell-hole. I'm sorry I brought you, anyway."

"But I had to come," she said in a low voice.

Like the two men, she wore a grey flannel shirt, knickers, and spiral puttees.

They, however, carried rifles as well as packs; and the girl's pack was lighter.

They had halted by a swift, icy rivulet to eat, without building a fire. After that they crossed the Ireland Vlaie and the main creek, where remains of a shanty stood on the bluff above the right bank —the last sign of man.

Beyond lay the uncharted land, skimped and shirked entirely in certain regions by map-makers; —an unknown wilderness on the edges of which Selden had often camped when deer shooting.

It was along this edge he was leading them, now, to a lean-to which he had erected, and from which he had travelled in to Glenwild to use the superintendent's telephone to New York.

There seemed to be no animal life stirring in this forest; their torches illuminated no fiery orbs of dazed wild things surprised at gaze in the wilderness; no leaping furry form crossed their flashlights' fan-shaped radiance.

There were no nocturnal birds to be seen or heard, either: no bittern squawked from hidden sloughs; no herons howled; not an owl-note, not a whispering cry of a whippoorwill, not the sudden uncanny twitter of those little birds that become abruptly vocal after dark, interrupted the dense stillness of the forest.

And it was not until his electric torch glimmered repeatedly upon reaches of dusk-hidden bog that Cleves understood how Selden took his bearings—for the night was thick and there were no stars.

"Yes," said Selden tersely, "I'm trying to skirt the bog until I shine a peeled stick."

An hour later the peeled alder-stem glittered in the beam of the torches. In ten minutes something white caught the electric rays.

It was Selden's spare undershirt drying on a bush behind the lean-to.

"Can we have a fire?" asked Cleves, relieving his wife of her pack and striding into the open-faced camp.

"Yes, I'll fix it," replied Selden. "Are you all right, Mrs. Cleves?"

Tressa said: "Delightfully tired, thank you." And smiled faintly at her husband as he let go his own pack, knelt, and spread a blanket for his wife.

He remained there, kneeling, as she seated herself.

"Are you quite fit?" he asked bluntly. Yet, through his brusqueness her ear caught a vague undertone of something else—anxiety perhaps—perhaps tenderness. And her heart stirred deliciously in her breast.

He inflated a pillow for her; the firelight glimmered, brightened, spread glowing across her feet. She lay back with a slight sigh, relaxed.

Then, suddenly, the thrill of her husband's touch flooded her face with colour; but she lay motionless, one arm flung across her eyes, while he unrolled her puttees and unlaced her muddy shoes.

A heavenly warmth from the fire dried her stockinged feet. Later, on the edge of sleep, she opened her eyes and found herself propped upright on her husband's shoulder.

Drowsily, obediently she swallowed spoonfuls of the hot broth which he administered.

"Are you really quite comfortable, dear?" he whispered.

"Wonderfully. . . . And so very happy. . . . Thank you—dear."

She lay back, suffering him to bathe her face and hands with warm water.

When the fire was only a heap of dying coals, she turned over on her right side and extended her hand a little way into the darkness. Searching, half asleep, she touched her husband, and her hand relaxed in his nervous clasp. And she fell into the most perfect sleep which she had known in years.

She dreamed that somebody whispered to her, "Darling, darling, wake up. It is morning, beloved."

Suddenly she opened her eyes; and saw her husband set a tray, freshly plaited out of Indian willow, beside her blanket.

"Here's your breakfast, pretty lady," he said, smilingly. "And over there is an exceedingly frigid pool of water. You're to have the camp to yourself for the next hour or two."

"You dear fellow," she murmured, still confused by sleep, and reached out to touch his hand. He caught hers and kissed it, back and palm, and got up hastily as though scared.

"Selden and I will stand sentry," he muttered. "There is no hurry, you know."

She heard him and his comrade walking away over dried leaves; their steps receded; a dry stick cracked distantly; then silence stealthily invaded the place like a cautious living thing, creeping unseen through the golden twilight of the woods.

Seated in her blanket, she drank the coffee; ate a little; then lay down again in the early sun, feeling the warmth of the heap of whitening coals at her feet, also.

For an hour she dozed awake, drowsily opening her eyes now and then to look across the glade at the pool over which a single dragon-fly glittered on guard.

Finally she rose resolutely, grasped a bit of soap, and went down to the edge of the pool.

Tressa was in flannel shirt and knickers when her husband and Selden hailed the camp and presently appeared walking slowly toward the dead fire.

Their grave faces checked her smile of greeting; her husband came up and laid one hand on her arm, looking at her out of thoughtful, preoccupied eyes.

"What is the Tchordagh?" he said in a low voice.

The girl's quiet face went white.

"The—the Tchordagh!" she stammered.

"Yes, dear. What is it?"

"I don't—don't know where you heard that term," she whispered. "The Tchordagh is the—the power of Erlik. It is a term. . . . In it is comprehended all the evil, all the cunning, all the perverted spiritual intelligence of Evil,—its sinister might,—its menace. It is an Alouäd-Yezidee term, and it is written in brass in Eighur characters on the Eight Towers, and on the Rampart of Gog and Magog;—nowhere else in the world!"

"It is written on a pine tree a few paces from this camp," said Cleves absently.

Selden said: "It has not been there more than an hour or two, Mrs. Cleves. A square of bark was cut out and on the white surface of the wood this word is written in English."

"Can you tell us what it signifies?" asked Cleves, quietly.

Tressa's studied effort at self-control was apparent to both men.

She said: "When that word is written, then it is a death struggle between all the powers of Darkness and those who have read the written letters of that word. . . . For it is written in The Iron Book that no one but the Assassin of Khorassan—excepting the Eight Sheiks—shall read that written word and live to boast of having read it."

"Let us sit here and talk it over," said Selden soberly.

And when Tressa was seated on a fallen log, and Cleves settled down cross-legged at her feet, Selden spoke again, very soberly:

"On the edges of these woods, to the northwest, lies a sea of briers, close growing, interwoven and matted, strong and murderous as barbed wire.

"Miles out in this almost impenetrable region lies a patch of trees called Fool's Acre.

"At Wells I heard that the only man who had ever managed to reach Fool's Acre was a trapper, and that he was still living.

"I found him at Rainbow Lake—a very old man, who had a fairly clear recollection of Fool's Acre and his exhausting journey there.

"And he told me that man had been there before he had. For there was a roofless stone house there, and the remains of a walled garden. And a skull deep in the wild grasses."

Selden paused and looked down at the recently healed scars on his wrists and hands.

"It was a rotten trip," he said bluntly. "It took me three days to cut a tunnel through that accursed tangle of matted brier and grey birch. . . . Fool's Acre is a grove of giant trees—first growth pine, oak, and maple. Great outcrops of limestone ledges bound it on the east. A brook runs through the woods.

"There is a house there, *no longer roofless,* and built of slabs of fossil-pitted limestone. The glass in the windows is so old that it is iridescent.

"A seven-foot wall encloses the house, built also of slabs blasted out of the rock outcrop, and all pitted with fossil shells.

"Inside is a garden—not the *remains* of one—a beautiful garden full of unfamiliar flowers. And in this garden I saw the Yezidee on his knees *making living things out of lumps of dead earth!*"

"The Tchordagh!" whispered the girl.

"What was the Yezidee doing?" demanded Cleves nervously.

Involuntarily all three drew nearer each other there in the sunshine.

"It was difficult for me to see," said Selden in his quiet, serious voice. "It was nearly twilight: I lay flat on top of the wall under the curving branches of a huge syringa bush in full bloom. The Yezidees——"

"Were there two!" exclaimed Cleves.

"Two. They were squatting on the old stone path bordering one of the flower-beds." He turned to Tressa: "They both wore white cloths twisted around their heads, and long soft garments of white. Under these their bare, brown legs showed, but they wore things on their naked feet which were shaped like what we call Turkish slippers—only different."

"Black and green," nodded Tressa with the vague horror growing in her face.

"Yes. The soles of their shoes were bright green."

"Green is the colour sacred to Islam," said Tressa. "The priests of Satan defile it by staining with green the soles of their footwear."

After an interval: "Go on," said Cleves nervously.

Selden drew closer, and they bent their heads to listen:

"I don't, even now, know what the Yezidees were actually doing. In the twilight it was hard to see clearly. But I'll tell you what it looked like to me. One of these squatting creatures would scoop out a handful of soil from the flower-bed, and mould it for a few moments between his lean, sinewy fingers, and then he'd open his hands and—and something *alive*—something small like a rat or a toad, or God knows what, would escape from between his palms and run out into the grass——"

Selden's voice failed and he looked at Cleves with sickened eyes.

"I can't—can't make you understand how repulsive to me it was to see a wriggling live thing creep out between their fingers and—and go running or scrambling away—little loathsome things with humpy backs that hopped or scurried through the grass——"

"What on earth *were* these Yezidees doing, Tressa?" asked Cleves almost roughly.

The girl's white face was marred by the imprints of deepening horror.

"It is the Tchor-Dagh," she said mechanically. "They are using every resource of hell to destroy me—testing the gigantic power of Evil—as though it were some vast engine charged with thunderous destruction!—and they were testing it to discover its terrific capacity to annihilate——"

Her voice died in her dry throat; she dropped her bloodless visage into both hands and remained seated so.

Both men looked at her in silence, not daring to interfere. Finally the girl lifted her pallid face from her hands.

"That is what they were doing," she said in a dull voice. "Out of inanimate earth they were making things animate—living creatures—to—to test the hellish power which they are storing—concentrating—for my destruction."

"What is their purpose?" asked Cleves harshly. "What do these Mongol Sorcerers expect to gain by making little live things out of lumps of garden dirt?"

"They are testing their power," whispered the girl.

"Like tuning up a huge machine?" muttered Selden.

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

"To make larger living creatures out of—of clay."

"They can't—they can't *create!*" exclaimed Cleves. "I don't know how—by what filthy tricks—they make rats out of dirt. But they can't make a—anything—like a—like a man!"

Tressa's body trembled slightly.

"Once," she said, "in the temple, Prince Sanang took dust which was brought in sacks of goat-skin, and fashioned the heap of dirt with his hands, so that it resembled the body of a man lying there on the marble floor under the shrine of Erlik. . . . And—and then, there in the shadows where only the Dark Star burned—that black lamp which is called the Dark Star—the long heap of dust lying there on the marble pavement began to—to *breathe!*—"

She pressed both hands over her breast as though to control her trembling body: "I saw it; I saw the long shape of dust begin to breathe, to stir, move, and slowly lift itself——"

"A Yezidee trick!" gasped Cleves; but he also was trembling now.

"God!" whispered the girl. "Allah alone knows

—the Merciful, the Long Suffering—He knows what it was that we temple girls saw there—that Yulun saw—that Sa-n'sa and I beheld there rising up like a man from the marble floor—and standing erect in the shadowy twilight of the Dark Star. . . ."

Her hands gripped at her breast; her face was deathly.

"Then," she said, "I saw Prince Sanang draw his sabre of Indian steel, and he struck . . . once only. . . . And a dead man fell down where the *thing* had stood. And all the marble was flooded with scarlet blood."

"A trick," repeated Cleves, in the ghost of his own voice. But his gaze grew vacant.

Presently Selden spoke in tones that sounded weakly querulous from emotional reaction:

"There is a path—a tunnel under the matted briers. It took me more than a week to cut it out. It is possible to reach Fool's Acre. We can try—with our rifles—if you say so, Mrs. Cleves."

The girl looked up. A little colour came into her cheeks. She shook her head.

"Their bodies may not be there in the garden," she said absently. "What you saw may not have been that part of them—the material which dies by knife or bullet. . . . And it is necessary that these Yezidees should die."

"Can you do anything?" asked Cleves, hoarsely.

She looked at her husband; tried to smile:

"I must try. . . . I think we had better not lose any time—if Mr. Selden will lead us."

"Now?"

"Yes, we had better go, I think," said the girl. Her smile still remained stamped on her lips, but her eyes seemed preoccupied as though following the movements of something remote that was passing across the far horizon.

CHAPTER XIV

A DEATH TRAIL

THE way to Fool's Acre was under a tangled canopy of thorns, under rotting windfalls of grey mirch, through tunnel after tunnel of fallen débris woven solidly by millions of strands of tough cat-briers which cut the flesh like barbed wire.

There was blood on Tressa, where her flannel shirt had been pierced in a score of places. Cleves and Selden had been painfully slashed.

Silent, thread-like streams flowed darkling under the tangled mass that roofed them. Sometimes they could move upright; more often they were bent double; and there were long stretches where they had to creep forward on hands and knees through sparse wild grasses, soft, rotten soil, or paths of sphagnum which cooled their feverish skin in velvety, icy depths.

At noon they rested and ate, lying prone under the matted roof of their tunnel.

Cleves and Selden had their rifles. Tressa lay like a slender boy, her brier-torn hands empty.

And, as she lay there, her husband made a sponge of a handful of sphagnum moss, and bathed her face and her arms, cleansing the dried blood from the skin, while the girl looked up at him out of grave, inscrutable eyes.

The sun hung low over the wilderness when they came to the woods of Fool's Acre. They crept cautiously out of the briers, among ferns and open spots carpeted with pine needles and dead leaves which were beginning to burn ruddy gold under the level rays of the sun.

Lying flat behind an enormous oak, they remained listening for a while. Selden pointed through the woods, eastward, whispering that the house stood there not far away.

"Don't you think we might risk the chance and use our rifles?" asked Cleves in a low voice.

"No. It is the Tchor-Dagh that confronts us. I wish to talk to Sansa," she murmured.

A moment later Selden touched her arm.

"My God," he breathed, "who is that!"

"It is Sansa," said Tressa calmly, and sat up among the ferns. And the next instant Sansa stepped daintily out of the red sunlight and seated herself among them without a sound.

Nobody spoke. The newcomer glanced at Selden, smiled slightly, blushed, then caught a glimpse of Cleves where he lay in the brake, and a mischievous glimmer came into her slanting eyes.

"Did I not tell my lord truths?" she inquired in a demure whisper. "As surely as the sun is a dragon, and the flaming pearl burns between his claws, so surely burns the soul of Heart of Flame between thy guarding hands. There are as many words as there are demons, my lord, but it is written that *Niaz* is the greatest of all words save only the name of God."

She laughed without any sound, sweetly malicious where she sat among the ferns.

"Heart of Flame," she said to Tressa, "you called me and I *made the effort.*"

"Darling," said Tressa in her thrilling voice, "the Yezidees are making living things out of dust,—as Sanang Noïane made that thing in the Temple. . . . And slew it before our eyes."

"The Tchor-Dagh," said Sansa calmly.

"The Tchor-Dagh," whispered Tressa.

Sansa's smooth little hands crept up to the collar of her odd, blue tunic; grasped it.

"In the name of God the Merciful," she said without a tremor, "listen to me, Heart of Flame, and may my soul be ransom for yours!"

"I hear you, Sansa."

Sansa said, her fingers still grasping the embroidered collar of her tunic:

"Yonder, behind walls, two Tower Chiefs meddle with the Tchor-Dagh, making living things out of the senseless dust they scrape from the garden."

Selden moistened his dry lips. Sansa said:

"The Yezidees who have come into this wilderness are Arrak Sou-Sou, the Squirrel; and Tiyang Khan. . . . May God remember them in Hell!"

"May God remember them," said Tressa mechanically.

"And these two Yezidee Sorcerers," continued Sansa coolly, "have advanced thus far in the Tchor-Dagh; for they now roam these woods, digging like demons for the roots of Ginseng; and thou knowest, O Heart of Flame, what that indicates."

"Does Ginseng grow in these woods!" exclaimed Tressa with a new terror in her widening eyes.

"Ginseng grows here, little Rose-Heart, and the roots are as perfect as human bodies. And Tiyang Khan squats in the walled garden moulding the Ginseng roots in his unclean hands, while Sou-Sou the Squirrel scratches among the dead leaves of the woods for roots as perfect as a naked human body.

"All day long the Sou-Sou rummages among the trees; all day long Tiyang pats and rubs and moulds the Ginseng roots in his skinny fingers. It is the Tchor-Dagh, Heart of Flame. And these Sorcerers must be destroyed."

"Are their bodies here?"

"Arrak is in the body. And thus it shall be accomplished: listen attentively, Rose Heart Afire!—I shall remain here with——" she looked at Selden and flushed a trifle, "—with you, my lord. And when the Squirrel comes a-digging, so shall my lord slay him with a bullet. . . . And when I hear his soul bidding his body farewell, then I shall make prisoner his soul. . . . And send it to the Dark Star. . . . And the rest shall be in the hands of Allah."

She turned to Tressa and caught her hands in both of her own:

"It is written on the Iron Pages," she whispered, "that we belong to Erlik and we return to him. But in the Book of Gold it is written otherwise: 'God preserve us from Satan who was stoned!' . . . Therefore, in the name of Allah! Now then, Heart of Flame, do your duty!"

A burning flush leaped over Tressa's features.

"Is my soul, then, my own!"

"It belongs to God," said Sansa gravely.

"And—Sanang?"

"God is greatest."

"But—was God there—at the Lake of the Ghosts?"

"God is everywhere. It is so written in the Book of Gold," replied Sansa, pressing her hands tenderly.

"Recite the Fatha, Heart of Flame. Thy lips shall not stiffen; God listens."

Tressa rose in the sunset glory and stood as though dazed, and all crimsoned in the last fiery bars of the declining sun.

Cleves also rose.

Sansa laughed noiselessly: "My lord would go whither thou goest, Heart of Fire!" she whispered. "And thy ways shall be his ways!"

Tressa's cheeks flamed and she turned and looked at Cleves.

Then Sansa rose and laid a hand on Tressa's arm and on her husband's:

"Listen attentively. Tiyang Khan must be destroyed. The signal sounds when my lord's rifle-shot makes a loud noise here among these trees."

"Can I prevail against the Tchor-Dagh?" asked Tressa, steadily.

"Is not that event already in God's hands, darling?" said Sansa softly. She smiled and resumed her seat beside Selden, amid the drooping fern fronds.

"Bid thy dear lord leave his rifle here," she added quietly.

Cleves laid down his weapon. Selden pointed eastward in silence.

So they went together into the darkening woods.

In the dusk of heavy foliage overhanging the garden, Tressa lay flat as a lizard on the top of the wall. Beside her lay her husband.

In the garden below them flowers bloomed in scented thickets, bordered by walls of flat stone slabs split from boulders. A little lawn, very green, centred the garden.

And on this lawn, in the clear twilight still tinged with the sombre fires of sundown, squatted a man dressed in a loose white garment.

Save for a twisted breadth of white cloth, his shaven head was bare. His sinewy feet were naked, too, the lean, brown toes buried in the grass.

Tressa's lips touched her husband's ear.

"Tiyang Khan," she breathed. "Watch what he does!"

Shoulder to shoulder they lay there, scarcely daring to breathe. Their eyes were fastened on the Mongol Sorcerer, who, squatted below on his haunches, grave and deliberate as a great grey ape, continued busy with the obscure business which so intently preoccupied him.

In a short semi-circle on the grass in front of him he had placed a dozen wild Ginseng roots. The roots were enormous, astoundingly shaped like the human body, almost repulsive in their weird symmetry.

The Yezidee had taken one of these roots into his hands. Squatting there in the semi-dusk, he began to massage it between his long, muscular fingers, rubbing, moulding, pressing the root with caressing deliberation.

His unhurried manipulation, for a few moments, seemed to produce no result. But presently the Ginseng root became lighter in colour and more supple, yielding to his fingers, growing ivory pale, sinuously limber in a newer and more delicate symmetry.

"Look!" gasped Cleves, grasping his wife's arm. "*What* is that man doing!"

"The Tchor-Dagh!" whispered Tressa. "Do you see what lies twisting there in his hands!"

The Ginseng root had become the tiny naked body of a woman—a little ivory-white creature, struggling to escape between the hands that had created it—dark, powerful, masterly hands, opening leisurely now, and releasing the living being they had fashioned.

The thing scrambled between the fingers of the Sorcerer, leaped into the grass, ran a little way and hid, crouched down, panting, almost hidden by the long grass. The shocked watchers on the wall could still see the creature. Tressa felt Cleves' body trembling beside her. She rested a cool, steady hand on his.

"It is the Tchor-Dagh," she breathed close to his face. "The Mongol Sorcerer is becoming formidable."

"Oh, God!" murmured Cleves, "that thing he made is *alive!* I saw it. I can see it hiding there in the grass. It's frightened—breathing! It's alive!"

His pistol, clutched in his right hand, quivered. His wife laid her hand on it and cautiously shook her head.

"No," she said, "that is of no use."

"But what that Yezidee is doing is—is blasphemous——"

"Watch him! His mind is stealthily feeling its way among the laws and secrets of the Tchor-Dagh. He has found a thread. He is following it through the maze into hell's own labyrinth! He has created a tiny thing in the image of the Creator. He will try to create a larger being now. Watch him with his Ginseng roots!"

Tiyang, looming ape-like on his haunches in the deepening dusk, moulded and massaged the Ginseng roots, one after another. And one after another, tiny naked creatures wriggled out of his palms between his fingers and scuttled away into the herbage.

Already the dim lawn was alive with them, crawling, scurrying through the grass, creeping in among the flower-beds, little, ghostly-white things that glimmered from shade into shadow like moonbeams.

Tressa's mouth touched her husband's ear:

"It is for the secret of Destruction that the Yezidee seeks. But first he must learn the secret of creation. He is learning. . . . And he must learn no more than he has already learned."

"That Yezidee is a living man. Shall I fire?"

"No."

"I can kill him with the first shot."

"Hark!" she whispered excitedly, her hand closing convulsively on her husband's arm.

The whip-crack of a rifle-shot still crackled in their ears.

Tiyang had leaped to his feet in the dusk, a Ginseng root, half-alive, hanging from one hand and beginning to squirm.

Suddenly the first moonbeam fell across the wall. And in its lustre Tressa rose to her knees and flung up her right hand.

Then it was as though her palm caught and reflected the moon's ray, and hurled it in one blinding shaft straight into the dark visage of Tiyang-Khan.

The Yezidee fell as though he had been pierced by a shaft of steel, and lay sprawling there on the grass in the ghastly glare.

And where his features had been there gaped only a hole into the head.

Then a dreadful thing occurred; for everywhere the grass swarmed with the little naked creatures he had made, running, scrambling, scuttling, darting into the black hole which had been the face of Tiyang-Khan.

They poured into the awful orifice, crowding, jostling one another so violently that the head jerked from side to side on the grass, a wabbling, inert, soggy mass in the moonlight.

And presently the body of Tiyang-Khan, Warden of the Rampart of Gog and Magog, and Lord of the Seventh Tower, began to burn with white fire—a low, glimmering combustion that seemed to clothe the limbs like an incandescent mist.

On the wall knelt Tressa, the glare from her lifted hand streaming over the burning form below.

Cleves stood tall and shadowy beside his wife, the useless pistol hanging in his grasp.

Then, in the silence of the woods, and very near, they heard Sansa laughing. And Selden's anxious voice:

"Arrak is dead. The Sou-Sou hangs across a rock, head down, like a shot squirrel. Is all well with you?"

"Tiyang is on his way to his star," said Tressa calmly. "Somewhere in the world his body has bid its mind farewell. . . . And so his body may live for a little, blind, in mental darkness, fed by others, and locked in all day, all night, until the end."

Sansa, at the base of the wall, turned to Selden.

"Shall I bring my body with me, one day, my lord?" she asked demurely.

"Oh, Sansa——" he whispered, but she placed a fragrant hand across his lips and laughed at him in the moonlight.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE FIRELIGHT

IN 1920 the whole spiritual world was trembling under the thundering shock of the Red Surf pounding the frontiers of civilisation from pole to pole.

Up out of the hell-pit of Asia had boiled the molten flood, submerging Russia, dashing in giant waves over Germany and Austria, drenching Italy, France, England with its bloody spindrift.

And now the Red Rain was sprinkling the United States from coast to coast, and the mindless administration, scared out of its stupidity at last, began a frantic attempt to drain the country of the filthy flood and throw up barriers against the threatened deluge.

In every state and city Federal agents made wholesale arrests—too late!

A million minds had already been perverted and dominated by the terrible Sect of the Assassins. A million more were sickening under the awful psychic power of the Yezidee.

Thousands of the disciples of the Yezidee devil-worshipers had already been arrested and held for deportation,—poor, wretched creatures whose minds were no longer their own, but had been stealthily surprised, seized and mastered by Mongol adepts and filled with ferocious hatred against their fellow men.

Yet, of the Eight Yezidee Assassins only two now remained alive in America,—Togrul, and Sanang, the Slayer of Souls.

Yarghouz was dead; Djamouk the Fox, Kahn of the Fifth Tower was dead; Yaddin-ed-Din, Arrak the Sou-Sou, Gutchlug, Tiyang Khan, all were dead. Six Towers had become dark and silent. From them the last evil thought, the last evil shape had sped; the last wicked prayer had been said to Erlik, Khagan of all Darkness.

But his emissary on earth, Prince Sanang, still lived. And at Sanang's heels stole Togrul, Tougtchi to Sanang Noïane, the Slayer of Souls.

In the United States there had been a cessation of the active campaign of violence toward those in authority. Such unhappy dupes of the Yezidees as the I. W. W. and other radicals were, for the time, physically quiescent. Crude terrorism with its more brutal outrages against life and law ceased. But two million sullen eyes, in which all independent human thought had been extinguished, watched unblinking the wholesale arrests by the government—watched panic-stricken officials rushing hither and thither to execute the mandate of a miserable administration—watched and waited in dreadful silence.

In that period of ominous quiet which possessed the land, the little group of Secret Service men that surrounded the young girl who alone stood between a trembling civilisation and the threat of hell's own chaos, became convinced that Sanang was preparing a final and terrible effort to utterly overwhelm the last vestige of civilisation in the United States.

What shape that plan would develop they could not guess.

John Recklow sent Benton to Chicago to watch that centre of infection for the appearance there of the Yezidee Togrul.

Selden went to Boston where a half-witted group of parlour-socialists at Cambridge were talking too loudly and loosely to please even the most tolerant at Harvard.

But neither Togrul nor Sanang had, so far, materialised in either city; and John Recklow prowled the purlieus of New York, haunting strange byways and obscure quarters where the dull embers of revolution always smouldered, watching for the Yezidee who was the deep-bedded, vital root of this psychic evil which menaced the minds of all mankind,—Sanang, the Slayer of Souls.

Recklow's lodgings were tucked away in Westover Court—three bedrooms, a parlour and a kitchenette. Tressa Cleves occupied one bedroom; her husband another; Recklow the third.

And in this tiny apartment, hidden away among a group of old buildings, the very existence of which was unknown to the millions who swarmed the streets of the greatest city in the world,—here in Westover Court, a dozen paces from the roar of Broadway, was now living a young girl upon whose psychic power the only hope of the world now rested.

The afternoon had turned grey and bitter; ragged flakes still fell; a pallid twilight possessed the snowy city, through which lighted trains and taxis moved in the foggy gloom.

By three o'clock in the afternoon all shops were illuminated; the south windows of the Hotel Astor across the street spread a sickly light over the old buildings of Westover Court as John Recklow entered the tiled hallway, took the stairs to the left, and went directly to his apartment.

He unlocked the door and let himself in and stood a moment in the entry shaking the snow from his hat and overcoat.

The sitting-room lamp was unlighted but he could see a fire in the grate, and Tressa Cleves seated near, her eyes fixed on the glowing coals.

He bade her good evening in a low voice; she turned her charming head and nodded, and he drew a chair to the fender and stretched out his wet shoes to the warmth.

"Is Victor still out?" he inquired.

She said that her husband had not yet returned. Her eyes were on the fire, Recklow's rested on her shadowy face.

"Benton got his man in Chicago," he said. "It was not Togrul Kahn."

"Who was it?"

"Only a Swami fakir who'd been preaching sedition to a little group of greasy Bengalese from Seattle. . . . I've heard from Selden, too."

She nodded listlessly and lifted her eyes.

"Neither Sanang nor Togrul have appeared in Boston," he said. "I think they're here in New York."

The girl said nothing.

After a silence:

"Are you worried about your husband?" he asked abruptly.

"I am always uneasy when he is absent," she said quietly.

"Of course. . . . But I don't suppose he knows that."

"I suppose not."

Recklow leaned over, took a coal in the tongs and lighted a cigar. Leaning back in his armchair, he said in a musing voice:

"No, I suppose your husband does not realise that you are so deeply concerned over his welfare."

The girl remained silent.

"I suppose," said Recklow softly, "he doesn't dream you are in love with him."

Tressa Cleves did not stir a muscle. After a long silence she said in her even voice:

"Do you think I am in love with my husband, Mr. Recklow?"

"I think you fell in love with him the first evening you met him."

"I did."

Neither of them spoke again for some minutes. Recklow's cigar went wrong; he rose and found another and returned to the fire, but did not light it.

"It's a rotten day, isn't it?" he said with a shiver, and dumped a scuttle of coal on the fire.

They watched the blue flames playing over the grate.

Tressa said: "I could no more help falling in love with him than I could stop my heart beating. . . . But I did not dream that anybody knew."

"Don't you think he ought to know?"

"Why? He is not in love with me."

"Are you sure, Mrs. Cleves?"

"Yes. He is wonderfully sweet and kind. But he could not fall in love with a girl who has been what I have been."

Recklow smiled. "What have you been, Tressa Norne?"

"You know."

"A temple-girl at Yian?"

"And at the Lake of the Ghosts," she said in a low voice.

"What of it?"

"I can not tell you, Mr. Recklow. . . . Only that I lost my soul in the Yezidee Temple——"

"That is untrue!"

"I wish it were untrue. . . . My husband tells me that nothing can really harm the soul. I try to believe him. . . . But Erlik lives. And when my soul at last shall escape my body, it shall not escape the Slayer of Souls."

"That is monstrously untrue——"

"No. I tell you that Prince Sanang slew my soul. And my soul's ghost belongs to Erlik. How can any man fall in love with such a girl?"

"Why do you say that Sanang slew your soul?" asked Recklow, peering at her averted face through the reddening firelight.

She lay still in her chair for a moment, then turned suddenly on him:

"He *did* slay it! He came to the Lake of the Ghosts as my lover; he meant to have done it there; but I would not have him—would not listen, nor suffer his touch!—I mocked at him and his passion. I laughed at his Tchortchas. They were afraid of me!—"

She half rose from her chair, grasped the arms, then seated herself again, her eyes ablaze with the memory of wrongs.

"How dare I show my dear lord that I am in love with him when Sanang's soul caught my soul out of my body one day—surprised my soul while my body lay asleep in the Yezidee Temple!—and bore it in his arms to the very gates of hell!"

"Good God," whispered Recklow, "what do you mean? Such things can't happen."

"Why not? They do happen. I was caught unawares. . . . It was one golden afternoon, and Yulan and Sansa and I were eating oranges by the fountain in the inner shrine. And I lay down by the pool and *made the effort*—you understand?"

"Yes."

"Very well. My soul left my body asleep and I went out over the tops of the flowers—idly, without aim or intent—as the winds blow in summer. . . . It was in the Wood of the White Moth that I saw Sanang's soul flash downward like a streak of fire and wrap my soul in flame! . . . And, in a flash, we were at the gates of hell before I could free myself from his embrace. . . . Then, by the Temple pool, among the oranges, I cried out asleep; and my terrified body sat up sobbing and trembling in Yulun's arms. But the Slayer of Souls had slain mine in the Wood of the White Moth—slain it as he caught me in his flaming arms. . . . And now you know why such a woman as I dare not bend to kiss the dust from my dear Lord's feet—Aie-a! Aie-a! I who have lost my girl's soul to him who slew it in the Wood of the White Moth!"

She sat rocking in her chair in the red firelight, her hands framing her lovely face, her eyes staring straight ahead as though they saw opening before them through the sombre shadows of that room all the dread magic of the East where the dancing flame of Sanang's blazing soul lighted their path to hell through the enchanted forest.

Recklow had grown pale, but his voice was steady.

"I see no reason," he said, "why your husband should not love you."

"I tell you my girl's soul belonged to Sanang—was part of his, for an instant."

"It is burned pure of dross."

"It is *burned.*"

Recklow remained silent. Tressa lay deep in her armchair, twisting her white fingers.

"What makes him so late?" she said . . . "I sent my soul out twice to look for him, and could not find him."

"Send it again," said Recklow, fearfully.

For ten minutes the girl lay as though asleep, then her eyes unclosed and she said drowsily: "I can not find him."

"Did—did you learn anything while—while you were—away?" asked Recklow cautiously.

"Nothing. There is a thick darkness out there—I mean a darkness gathering over the whole land. It is like a black fog. When the damned pray to Erlik there is a darkness that gathers like a brown mist——"

Her voice ceased; her hands tightened on the arms of her chair.

"*That* is what Sanang is doing!" she said in a breathless voice.

"What?" demanded Recklow.

"Praying! That is what he is doing! A million perverted minds which he has seized and obsessed are being concentrated on blasphemous prayers to Erlik! Sanang is directing them. Do you understand the terrible power of a million minds all *willing,* in unison, the destruction of good and the

triumph of evil? A million human minds! More! For that is what he is doing. That is the thick darkness that is gathering over the entire Western world. It is the terrific materialisation of evil power from evil minds, all focussed upon the single thought that evil must triumph and good die!"

She sat, gripping the arms of her chair, pale, rigid, terribly alert, dreadfully enlightened, now, concerning the awful and new menace threatening the sanity of mankind.

She said in her steady, emotionless voice: "When the Yezidee Sorcerers desire to overwhelm a nomad people—some yort perhaps that has resisted the Sheiks of the Eight Towers, then the Slayer of Souls rides with his Black Banners to the Namaz-Ga or Place of Prayer.

"Two marble bridges lead to it. There are fourteen hundred mosques there. Then come the Eight, each with his shroud, chanting the prayers for those dead in hell. And there the Yezidees pray blasphemously, all their minds in ferocious unison. . . . And I have seen a little yort full of Broad Faces with their slanting eyes and sparse beards, sicken and die, and turn black in the sun as though the plague had breathed on them. And I have seen the Long Noses and bushy beards of walled towns wither and perish in the blast and blight from the Namaz-Ga where the Slayer of Souls sat his saddle and prayed to Erlik, and half a million Yezidees prayed in blasphemous unison."

Recklow's head rested on his left hand. The other, unconsciously, had crept toward his pistol—the weapon which had become so useless in this awful struggle between this girl and the loosened forces of hell.

"Is that what you think Sanang is about?" he asked heavily.

"Yes. I know it. He has seized the minds of a million men in America. Every anarchist is to-day concentrating in one evil and supreme mental effort, under Sanang's direction, to will the triumph of evil and the doom of civilisation. . . . I wish my husband would come home."

"Tressa?"

She turned her pallid face in the firelight: "If Sanang has appointed a Place of Prayer," she said, "he himself will pray on that spot. That will be the Namaz-Ga for the last two Yezidee Sorcerers still alive in the Western World."

"That's what I wished to ask you," said Recklow softly. "Will you try once more, Tressa?"

"Yes. I will send out my soul again to look for the Namaz-Ga."

She lay back in her armchair and closed her eyes.

"Only," she added, as though to herself, "I wish my dear lord were safe in this room beside me. . . . May God's warriors be his escort. And surely they are well armed, and can prevail over demons. Aie-a! I wish my lord would come home out of the darkness. . . . Mr. Recklow?"

"Yes, Tressa."

"I thought I heard him on the stairs."

"Not yet."

"Aie-a!" she sighed and closed her eyes again. She lay like one dead. There was no sound in the room save the soft purr of the fire.

Suddenly from the sleeping girl a frightened voice burst: "Yulun! Yulun! Where is that yellow maid of the Baroulass? . . . What is she doing? That sleek young thing belongs to Togrul Kahn? Yulun! I am afraid of her! Tell Sansa to watch that she does not stir from the Lake of the Ghosts! . . . Warn that young Baroulass Sorceress that if she stirs I slay her. And know how to do it in spite of Sanang and all the prayers from the Namaz-Ga! Yulun! Sansa! Watch her, follow her, hearts of flame! My soul be ransom for yours! Tokhta!"

The girl's eyes unclosed. Presently she stirred slightly, passed one hand across her forehead, turned her head toward Recklow.

"I could not discover the Namaz-Ga," she said wearily. "I wish my husband would return."

CHAPTER XVI

THE PLACE OF PRAYER

HER husband called her on the telephone a few minutes later:

"Fifty-three, Six-twenty-six speaking! Who is this?"

"V-sixty-nine," replied his young wife happily. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Is M. H. 2479 there?"

"He is here."

"Very well. An hour ago I saw Togrul Khan in a limousine and chased him in a taxi. His car got away in the fog but it was possible to make out the number. An empty Cadillac limousine bearing that number is now waiting outside the 44th Street entrance to the Hotel Astor. The doorman will hold it until I finish telephoning. Tell M. H. 2479 to send men to cover this matter——"

"Victor!"

"Be careful! Yes, what is it?"

"I beg you not to stir in this affair until I can join you——"

"Hurry then. It's just across the street from Westover Court——" His voice ceased; she heard another voice, faintly, and an exclamation from her husband; then his hurried voice over the wire: "The doorman just sent word to hurry. The car number is N. Y. *015 F 0379!* I've got to run! Good-b——"

He left the booth at the end of Peacock Alley, ran down the marble steps to the left and out to the snowy sidewalk, passing on his way a young girl swathed to the eyes in chinchilla who was hurrying into the hotel. As he came to where the limousine was standing, he saw that it was still empty although the door stood open and the engine was running. Around the chauffeur stood the gold laced doorman, the gorgeously uniformed carriage porter and a mounted policeman.

"Hey!" said the latter when he saw Cleves,—"what's the matter here? What are you holding up this car for?"

Cleves beckoned him, whispered, then turned to the doorman.

"Why did you send for me? Was the chauffeur trying to pull out?"

"Yes, sir. A lady come hurrying out an' she jumps in, and the shawfur he starts her humming——"

"A lady! Where did she go?"

"It was that young lady in chinchilla fur. The one you just met when you run out. Yessir! Why, as soon as I held up the car and called this here cop, she opens the door and out she jumps and beats it into the hotel again——"

"Hold that car, Officer!" interrupted Cleves.

"Keep it standing here and arrest anybody who gets into it! I'll be back again——"

He turned and hurried into the hotel, traversed Peacock Alley scanning every woman he passed, searching for a slim shape swathed in chinchilla. There were no chinchilla wraps in Peacock Alley; none in the dining-room where people already were beginning to gather and the orchestra was now playing; no young girl in chinchilla in the waiting room, or in the north dining-room.

Then, suddenly, far across the crowded lobby, he saw a slender, bare-headed girl in a chinchilla cloak turn hurriedly away from the room-clerk's desk, holding a key in her white gloved hand.

Before he could take two steps in her direction she had disappeared in the crowd.

He made his way through the packed lobby as best he could amid throngs of people dressed for dinner, theatre, or other gaiety awaiting them somewhere out there in the light-smeared winter fog; but when he arrived at the room clerk's desk he looked for a chinchilla wrap in vain.

Then he leaned over the desk and said to the clerk in a low voice: "I am a Federal agent from the Department of Justice. Here are my credentials. Now, who was that young woman in chinchilla furs to whom you gave her door key a moment ago?"

The clerk leaned over his counter and, dropping his voice, answered that the lady in question had arrived only that morning from San Francisco; had registered as Madame Aoula Baroulass; and had been given a suite on the fourth floor numbered from 408 to 414.

"Do you mean to arrest her?" added the clerk in a weird whisper.

"I don't know. Possibly. Have you the master-key?"

The clerk handed it to him without a word; and Cleves hurried to the elevator.

On the fourth floor the matron on duty halted him, but when he murmured an explanation she nodded and laid a finger on her lips.

"Madame has gone to her apartment," she whispered.

"Has she a servant? Or friends with her?"

"No, sir. . . . I did see her speak to two foreign looking gentlemen in the elevator when she arrived this morning."

Cleves nodded; the matron pointed out the direction in silence, and he went rapidly down the carpeted corridor, until he came to a door numbered 408.

For a second only he hesitated, then swiftly fitted the master-key and opened the door.

The room—a bedroom—was brightly lighted; but there was nobody there. The other rooms—dressing closet, bath-room and parlour, all were brilliantly lighted by ceiling fixtures and wall brackets; but there was not a person to be seen in any of the rooms—nor, save for the illumination, was there any visible sign that anybody inhabited the apartment.

Swiftly he searched the apartment from end to end. There was no baggage to be seen, no garments, no toilet articles, no flowers in the vases, no magazines or books, not one article of feminine apparel or of personal bric-a-brac visible in the entire place.

Nor had the bed even been turned down—nor any preparation for the night's comfort been attempted. And, except for the blazing lights, it was as though the apartment had not been entered by anybody for a month.

All the windows were closed, all shades lowered and curtains drawn. The air, though apparently pure enough, had that vague flatness which one associates with an unused guest-chamber when opened for an airing.

Now, deliberately, Cleves began a more thorough search of the apartment, looking behind curtains, under beds, into clothes presses, behind sofas.

Then he searched the bureau drawers, dressers, desks for any sign or clew of the girl in the chinchillas. There was no dust anywhere,—the hotel management evidently was particular—but there was not even a pin to be found.

Presently he went out into the corridor and looked again at the number on the door. He had made no mistake.

Then he turned and sped down the long corridor to where the matron was standing beside her desk preparing to go off duty as soon as the other matron arrived to relieve her.

To his impatient question she replied positively that she had seen the girl in chinchillas unlock 408 and enter the apartment less than five minutes before he had arrived in pursuit.

"And I saw her lights go on as soon as she went in," added the matron, pointing to the distant illuminated transom.

"Then she went out through into the next apartment," insisted Cleves.

"The fire-tower is on one side of her; the scullery closet on the other," said the matron. "She could not have left that apartment without coming out into the corridor. And if she had come out I should have seen her."

"I tell you she isn't in those rooms!" protested Cleves.

"She must be there, sir. I saw her go in a few seconds before you came up."

At that moment the other matron arrived. There was no use arguing. He left the explanation of the situation to the woman who was going off duty, and, hastening his steps, he returned to apartment 408.

The door, which he had left open, had swung shut. Again he fitted the master-key, entered, paused on the threshold, looked around nervously, his nostrils suddenly filled with a puff of perfume.

And there on the table by the bed he saw a glass bowl filled with a mass of Chinese orchids—great odorous clusters of orange and snow-white bloom that saturated all the room with their freshening scent.

So astounded was he that he stood stock still, one hand still on the door-knob; then in a trice he had closed and locked the door from inside.

Somebody was in that apartment. There could be no doubt about it. He dropped his right hand into his overcoat pocket and took hold of his automatic pistol.

For ten minutes he stood so, listening, peering about the room from bed to curtains, and out into the parlour. There was not a sound in the place. Nothing stirred.

Now, grasping his pistol but not drawing it, he began another stealthy tour of the apartment, exploring every nook and cranny. And, at the end, had discovered nothing new.

When at length he realised that, as far as he could discover, there was not a living thing in the place excepting himself, a very faint chill grew along his neck and shoulders, and he caught his breath suddenly, deeply.

He had come back to the bedroom, now. The perfume of the orchids saturated the still air.

And, as he stood staring at them, all of a sudden he saw, where their twisted stalks rested in the transparent bowl of water, something moving—something brilliant as a live ember gliding out from among the mass of submerged stems—a living fish glowing in scarlet hues and winnowing the water with grotesquely trailing fins as delicate as filaments of scarlet lace.

To and fro swam the fish among the maze of orchid stalks. Even its eyes were hot and red as molten rubies; and as its crimson gills swelled and relaxed and swelled, tints of cherry-fire waxed and waned over its fat and glowing body.

And vaguely, now, in the perfume saturated air, Cleves seemed to sense a subtle taint of evil,—something sinister in the intense stillness of the place—in the jewelled fish gliding so silently in and out among the pallid convolutions of the drowned stems.

As he stood staring at the fish, the drugged odour of the orchids heavy in his throat and lungs, something stirred very lightly in the room.

Chills crawling over every limb, he looked around across his shoulder.

There was a figure seated cross-legged in the middle of the bed!

Then, in the perfumed silence, the girl laughed.

For a full minute neither of them moved. No sound had echoed her low laughter save the deadened pulsations of his own heart. But now there grew a faint ripple of water in the bowl where the scarlet fish, suddenly restless, was swimming hither and thither as though pursued by an invisible hand.

With the slight noise of splashing water in his ears, Cleves stood staring at the figure on the bed. Under her chinchilla cloak the girl seemed to be all a pale golden tint—hair, skin, eyes. The scant shred of an evening gown she wore, the jewels at her throat and breast, all were yellow and amber and saffron-gold.

And now, looking him in the eyes, she leisurely disengaged the robe of silver fur from her naked shoulders and let it fall around her on the bed. For a second the lithe, willowy golden thing gathered there as gracefully as a coiled snake filled him with swift loathing. Then, almost instantly, the beauty of the lissome creature fascinated him.

She leaned forward and set her elbows on her two knees, and rested her face between her hands—like a gold rose-bud between two ivory petals, he thought, dismayed by this young thing's beauty, shaken by the dull confusion of his own heart battering his breast like the blows of a rising tide.

"What do you wish?" she inquired in her soft young voice. "Why have you come secretly into my rooms to search—and clasping in your hand a loaded pistol deep within your pocket?"

"Why have you hidden yourself until now?" he retorted in a dull and laboured voice.

"I have been here."

"Where?"

"Here! . . . Looking at you. . . . And watching my scarlet fish. His name is Dzelim. He is nearly a thousand years old and as wise as a magician. Look upon him, my lord! See how rapidly he darts around his tiny crystal world!—like a comet through outer star-dust, running the eternal race with Time. . . . And—yonder is a chair. Will my lord be seated—at his new servant's feet?"

A strange, physical weariness seemed to weight his limbs and shoulders. He seated himself near the bed, never taking his heavy gaze from the smiling, golden thing which squatted there watching him so intently.

"Whose limousine was that which you entered and then left so abruptly?" he asked.

"My own."

"What was the Yezidee Togrul Kahn doing in it?"

"Did you see anybody in my car?" she asked, veiling her eyes a little with their tawny lashes.

"I saw a man with a thick beard dyed red with henna, and the bony face and slant eyes of Togrul the Yezidee."

"May my soul be ransom for yours, my lord, but you lie!" she said softly. Her lips parted in a smile; but her half-veiled eyes were brilliant as two topazes.

"Is that your answer?"

She lifted one hand and with her forefinger made signs from right to left and then downward as though writing in Turkish and in Chinese characters.

"It is written," she said in a low voice, "that we belong to God and we return to him. Look out what you are about, my lord!"

He drew his pistol from his overcoat and, holding it, rested his hand on his knee.

"Now," he said hoarsely, "while we await the coming of Togrul Kahn, you shall remain exactly where you are, and you shall tell me exactly who you are in order that I may decide whether to arrest you as an alien enemy inciting my countrymen to murder, or to let you go as a foreigner who is able to prove her honesty and innocence."

The girl laughed:

"Be careful," she said. "My danger lies in your youth and mine—somewhere between your lips and mine lies my only danger from you, my lord."

A dull flush mounted to his temples and burned there.

"I am the golden comrade to Heavenly-Azure," she said, still smiling. "I am the Third Immaum in the necklace Keuke wears where Yulun hangs as a rose-pearl, and Sansa as a pearl on fire.

"Look upon me, my lord!"

There was a golden light in his eyes which seemed to stiffen the muscles and confuse his vision. He heard her voice again as though very far away:

"It is written that we shall love, my lord—thou and I—this night—this night. Listen attentively. I am thy slave. My lips shall touch thy feet. Look upon me, my lord!"

There was a dazzling blindness in his eyes and in his brain. He swayed a little still striving to fix her with his failing gaze. His pistol hand slipped sideways from his knee, fell limply, and the weapon dropped to the thick carpet. He could still see the glimmering golden shape of her, still hear her distant voice:

"It is written that we belong to God . . . Tokhta! . . ."

Over his knees was settling a snow-white sheet; on it, in his lap, lay a naked knife. There was not a sound in the room save the rushing and splashing of the scarlet fish in its crystal bowl.

Bending nearer, the girl fixed her yellow eyes on the man who looked back at her with dying gaze, sitting upright and knee deep in his shroud.

Then, noiselessly she uncoiled her supple golden body, extending her right arm toward the knife.

"Throw back thy head, my lord, and stretch thy throat to the knife's sweet edge," she whispered caressingly. "No!—do not close your eyes. Look upon me. Look into my eyes. I am Aoula, temple girl of the Baroulass! I am mistress to the Slayer of Souls! I am a golden plaything to Sanang Noïane, Prince of the Yezidees. Look upon me attentively, my lord!"

Her smooth little hand closed on the hilt; the scarlet fish splashed furiously in the bowl, dislodging a blossom or two which fell to the carpet and slowly faded into mist.

Now she grasped the knife, and she slipped from the bed to the floor and stood before the dazed man.

"This is the Namaz-Ga," she said in her silky voice. "Behold, this is the appointed Place of Prayer. Gaze around you, my lord. These are the shadows of mighty men who come here to see you die in the Place of Prayer."

Cleves's head had fallen back, but his eyes were open. The Baroulass girl took his head in both hands and turned it hither and thither. And his glazing eyes seemed to sweep a throng of shadowy white-robed men crowding the room. And he saw the bloodless, symmetrical visage of Sanang among them, and the great red beard of Togrul; and his stiffening lips parted in an uttered cry, and sagged open, flaccid and soundless.

The Baroulass sorceress lifted the shroud from his knees and spread it on the carpet, moving with leisurely grace about her business and softly intoning the Prayers for the Dead.

Then, having made her arrangements, she took her knife into her right hand again and came back to the half-conscious man, and stood close in front of him, bending near and looking curiously into his dimmed eyes.

"Ayah!" she said smilingly. "This is the Place of Prayer. And you shall add your prayer to ours before I use my knife. So! I give you back your power of speech. Pronounce the name of Erlik!"

Very slowly his dry lips moved and his dry tongue trembled. The word they formed was,

"Tressa!"

Instantly the girl's yellow eyes grew incandescent and her lovely mouth became distorted. With her left hand she caught his chin, forced his head back, exposing his throat, and using all her strength drew the knife's edge across it.

But it was only her clenched fingers that swept the taut throat—clenched and empty fingers in which the knife had vanished.

And when the Baroulass girl saw that her clenched hand was empty, felt her own pointed nails cutting into the tender flesh of her own palm, she stared at her blood-stained fingers in sudden terror—stared, spread them, shrieked where she stood, and writhed there trembling and screaming as though gripped in an invisible trap.

But she fell silent when the door of the room opened noiselessly behind her;—and it was as though she dared not turn her head to face the end of all things which had entered the room and was drawing nearer in utter silence.

Suddenly she saw its shadow on the wall; and her voice burst from her lips in a last shuddering scream.

Then the end came slowly, without a sound, and she sank at the knees, gently, to a kneeling posture, then backward, extending her supple golden shape across the shroud; and lay there limp as a dead snake.

Tressa went to the bowl of water and drew from it every blossom. The scarlet fish was now thrashing the water to an iridescent spume; and Tressa plunged in her hands and seized it and flung it out—squirming and wheezing crimson foam—on the shroud beside the golden girl of the Baroulass. Then, very slowly, she drew the shroud over the dying things; stepped back to the chair where her husband lay unconscious; knelt down beside him and took his head on her shoulder, gazing, all the while, at the outline of the dead girl under the snowy shroud.

After a long while Cleves stirred and opened his eyes. Presently he turned his head sideways on her shoulder.

"Tressa," he whispered.

"Hush," she whispered, "all is well now." But she did not move her eyes from the shroud, which now outlined the still shapes of *two* human figures.

"John Recklow!" she called in a low voice.

Recklow entered noiselessly with drawn pistol. She motioned to him; he bent and lifted the edge of the shroud, cautiously. A bushy red beard protruded.

"Togrul!" he exclaimed. . . . "But who is this young creature lying dead beside him?"

Then Tressa caught the collar of her tunic in her left hand and flung back her lovely face looking upward out of eyes like sapphires wet with rain:

"In the name of the one and only God," she sobbed—"if there be no resurrection for dead souls, then I have slain this night in vain!

"For what does it profit a girl if her soul be lost to a lover and her body be saved for her husband?"

She rose from her knees, the tears still falling, and went and looked down at the outlined shapes beneath the shroud.

Recklow had gone to the telephone to summon his own men and an ambulance. Now, turning toward Tressa from his chair:

"God knows what we'd do without you, Mrs. Cleves. I believe this accounts for all the Yezidees except Sanang."

"Excepting Prince Sanang," she said drearily. Then she went slowly to where her husband lay in his armchair, and sank down on the floor, and laid her cheek across his feet.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SLAYER OF SOULS

IN that great blizzard which, on the 4th of February, struck the eastern coast of the United States from Georgia to Maine, John Recklow and his men hunted Sanang, the last of the Yezidees.

And Sanang clung like a demon to the country which he had doomed to destruction, imbedding each claw again as it was torn loose, battling for the supremacy of evil with all his dreadful psychic power, striving still to seize, cripple, and slay the bodies and souls of a hundred million Americans.

Again he scattered the uncounted myriads of germs of the Black Plague which he and his Yezidees had brought out of Mongolia a year before; and once more the plague swept over the country, and thousands on thousands died.

But now the National, State and City governments were fighting, with physicians, nurses, and police, this gruesome epidemic which had come into the world from they knew not where. And National, State and City governments, aroused at last, were fighting the more terrible plague of anarchy.

Nation-wide raids were made from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the Gulf to the Lakes.

Thousands of terrorists of all shades and stripes whose minds had been seized and poisoned by the Yezidees were being arrested. Deportations had begun; government agents were everywhere swarming to clean out the foulness that had struck deeper into the body of the Republic than any one had supposed.

And it seemed, at last, as though the Red Plague, too, was about to be stamped out along with the Black Death called Influenza.

But only a small group of Secret Service men knew that a resurgence of these horrors was inevitable unless Sanang, the Slayer of Souls, was destroyed. And they knew, too, that only one person in America could hope to destroy Sanang, the last of the Yezidees, and that was Tressa Cleves.

Only by the sudden onset of the plague in various cities of the land had Recklow any clew concerning the whereabouts of Sanang.

In Boston, then Washington, then Kansas City, and then New York the epidemic suddenly blazed up. And in these places of death the Secret Service men always found a clew, and there they hunted Sanang, the Yezidee, to kill him without mercy where they might find him.

But they never found Sanang Noïane; only the ghastly marks of his poisoned claws on the body of the sickened nation—only minds diseased by the Red Plague and bodies dying of the Black Death—civil and social centres disorganized, disrupted, depraved, dying.

When the blizzard burst upon New York, struggling in the throes of the plague, and paralysed the metropolis for a week, John Recklow sent out a special alarm, and New York swarmed with Secret Service men searching the snow-buried city for a graceful, slender, dark young man whose eyes slanted a trifle in his amber-tinted face; who dressed fashionably, lived fastidiously, and spoke English perfectly in a delightfully modulated voice.

And to New York, thrice stricken by anarchy, by plague, and now by God, hurried, from all parts of the nation, thousands of secret agents who had been hunting Sanang in distant cities or who had been raiding the traitorous and secret gatherings of his mental dupes.

Agent ZB-303, who was volunteer agent James Benton, came from Boston with his new bride who had just arrived by way of England—a young girl named Yulun who landed swathed in sables, and stretched out both lovely little hands to Benton the instant she caught sight of him on the pier. Whereupon he took the slim figure in furs into his arms, which was interesting because they had never before met in the flesh.

So,—their honeymoon scarce begun, Benton and Yulun came from Boston in answer to Recklow's emergency call.

And all the way across from San Francisco came volunteer agent XLY-371, otherwise Alek Selden, bringing with him a girl named Sansa whom he had gone to the coast to meet, and whom he had immediately married after she had landed from the Japanese steamer *Nan-yang Maru*. Which, also, was remarkable, because, although they recognised each other instantly, and their hands and lips clung as they met, neither had ever before beheld the living body of the other.

The third man who came to New York at Recklow's summons was volunteer agent 53-6-26, otherwise Victor Cleves.

His young wife, suffering from nervous shock after the deaths of Togrul Khan and of the Baroulass girl, Aoula, had been convalescing in a private sanitarium in Westchester.

Until the summons came to her husband from Recklow, she had seen him only for a few moments every day. But the call to duty seemed to have effected a miraculous cure in the slender, blue-eyed girl who had lain all day long, day after day, in her still, sunny room scarcely unclosing her eyes at all save only when her husband was permitted to enter for the few minutes allowed them every day.

The physician had just left, after admitting that Mrs. Cleves seemed to be well enough to travel if she insisted; and she and her maid had already begun to pack when her husband came into her room.

She looked around over her shoulder, then rose from her knees, flung an armful of clothing into the trunk before which she had been kneeling, and came across the room to him. Then she dismissed her maid from the room. And when the girl had gone:

"I am well, Victor," she said in a low voice. "Why are you troubled?"

"I can't bear to have you drawn into this horrible affair once more."

"Who else is there to discover and overcome Sanang?" she asked calmly.

He remained silent.

So, for a few moments they stood confronting each other there in the still, sunny chamber—husband and wife who had never even exchanged the first kiss—two young creatures more vitally and intimately bound together than any two on earth—yet utterly separated body and soul from each other—two solitary spirits which had never merged; two bodies virginal and inviolate.

Tressa spoke first: "I must go. That was our bargain."

The word made him wince as though it had been a sudden blow. Then his face flushed red.

"Bargain or no bargain," he said, "I don't want you to go because I'm afraid you can not endure another shock like the last one. . . . And every time you have thrown your own mind and body between this Nation and destruction you have nearly died of it."

"And if I die?" she said in a low voice.

What answer she awaited—perhaps hoped for—was not the one he made. He said: "If you die in what you believe to be your line of duty, then it will be I who have killed you."

"That would not be true. It is you who have saved me."

"I have not. I have done nothing except to lead you into danger of death since I first met you. If you mean spiritually, that also is untrue. You have saved yourself—if that indeed were necessary. You have redeemed yourself—if it is true you needed redemption—which I never believed——"

"Oh," she sighed swiftly, "Sanang surprised my soul when it was free of my body—followed my soul into the Wood of the White Moth—caught it there all alone—and—slew it!"

His lips and throat had gone dry as he watched the pallid terror grow in her face.

Presently he recovered his voice: "You call that Yezidee the Slayer of Souls," he said, "but I tell you there is no such creature, no such power!

"I suppose I—I know what you mean—having seen what we call souls dissociated from their physical bodies—but that this Yezidee could do you any spiritual damage I do not for one instant believe. The idea is monstrous, I tell you——"

"I—I fought him—soul battling against soul——" she stammered, breathing faster and irregularly. "I struggled with Sanang there in the Wood of the White Moth. I called on God! I called on my two great dogs, Bars and Alaga! I recited the Fatha with all my strength—fighting convulsively whenever his soul seized mine; I cried out the name of Khidr, begging for wisdom! I called on the Ten Imaums, on Ali the Lion, on the Blessed Companions. Then I tore my spirit out of the grasp of his soul—but there was no escape!—no escape," she wailed. "For on every side I saw the cloud-topped rampart of Gog and Magog, and the woods rang with Erlik's laughter—the dissonant mirth of hell——"

She began to shudder and sway a little, then with an effort she controlled herself in a measure.

"There never has been," she began again with lips that quivered in spite of her—"there never has been one moment in our married lives when my soul dared forget the Wood of the White Moth—dared seek yours. . . . God lives. But so does Erlik. There are angels; but there are as many demons. . . . My soul is ashamed. . . . And very lonely . . . very lonely . . . but no fit companion—for yours——"

Her hands dropped listlessly beside her and her chin sank.

"So you believe that Yezidee devil caught your soul when it was wandering somewhere out of your body, and destroyed it," he said.

She did not answer, did not even lift her eyes until he had stepped close to her—closer than he had ever come. Then she looked up at him, but closed her eyes as he swept her into his arms and crushed her face and body against his own.

Now her red lips were on his; now her face and heart and limbs and breast melted into his—her breath, her pulse, her strength flowed into his and became part of their single being and single pulse and breath. And she felt their two souls flame and fuse together, and burn together in one heavenly blaze—felt the swift conflagration mount, overwhelm, and sweep her clean of the last lingering taint; felt her soul, unafraid, clasp her husband's spirit in its white embrace—clung to him, uplifted out of hell, rising into the blinding light of Paradise.

Far—far away she heard her own voice in singing whispers—heard her lips pronounce *The Name*—"Ata—Ata! Allahou——"

Her blue eyes unclosed; through a mist, in which she saw her husband's face, grew a vast metallic clamour in her ears.

Her husband kissed her, long, silently; then, retaining her hand, he turned and lifted the receiver from the clamouring telephone.

"Yes! Yes, this is 53-6-26. Yes, V-69 is with me. . . . When? . . . To-day? . . . Very well. . . . Yes, we'll come at once. . . . Yes, we can get a train in a few minutes. . . . All right. Good-bye."

He took his wife into his arms again.

"Dearest of all in the world," he said, "Sanang is cornered in a row of houses near the East River, and Recklow has flung a cordon around the entire block. Good God! I *can't* take you there!"

Then Tressa smiled, drew his head down, looked into his face till the clear blue splendour of her gaze stilled the tumult in his brain.

"I alone know how to deal with Prince Sanang," she said quietly. "And if John Recklow, or you, or Mr. Benton or Mr. Selden should kill him with your pistols, it would be only his body you slay, not the evil thing that would escape you and return to Erlik."

"*Must* you do this thing, Tressa?"

"Yes, I must do it."

"But—if our pistols cannot kill this sorcerer, how are you going to deal with him?"

"I know how."

"Have you the strength?"

"Yes—the bodily and the spiritual. Don't you know that I am already part of you?"

"We shall be nearer still," he murmured.

She flushed but met his gaze.

"Yes. . . . We shall be but one being. . . . Utterly. . . . For already our hearts and souls are one. And we shall become of one mind and one body.

"I am no longer afraid of Sanang Noïane!"

"No longer afraid to slay him?" he asked quietly.

A blue light flashed in her eyes and her face grew still and white and terrible.

"Death to the body? That is nothing, my lord!" she said, in a hard, sweet voice. "It is written that we belong to God and that we return to Him. All living things must die, Heart of the World! It is only the death of souls that matters. And it has arrived at a time in the history of mankind, I think, when the Slayer of Souls shall slay no more."

She looked at him, flushed, withdrew her hand and went slowly across the room to the big bay window where potted flowers were in bloom.

From a window-box she took a pinch of dry soil and dropped it into the bosom of her gown.

Then, facing the East, with lowered arms and palms turned outward:

"There is no god but God," she whispered—"the merciful, the long-suffering, the compassionate, the just.

"For it is written that when the heavens are rolled together like a scroll, every soul shall know what it hath wrought.

"And those souls that are dead in Jehannum shall arise from the dead, and shall have their day in court. Nor shall Erlik stay them till all has been said.

"And on that day the soul of a girl that hath been put to death shall ask for what reason it was slain.

"Thus it has been written."

Then Tressa dropped to her knees, touched the carpet with her forehead, straightened her lithe body and, looking over her shoulder, clapped her hands together sharply.

Her maid opened the door. "Hasten with my lord's luggage!" she cried happily; and, still kneeling, lifted her head to her husband and laughed up into his eyes.

"You should call the porter for we are nearly ready. Shall we go to the station in a sleigh? Oh, wonderful!"

She leaped to her feet, extended her hand and caught his.

"Horses for the lord of the Yiort!" she cried, laughingly. "Kosh! Take me out into this new white world that has been born to-day of the ten purities and the ten thousand felicities! It has been made anew for you and me who also have been born this day!"

He scarcely knew this sparkling, laughing girl with her quick grace and her thousand swift little moods and gaieties.

Porters came to take his luggage from his own room; and then her trunk and bags were ready, and were taken away.

The baggage sleigh drove off. Their own jingling sleigh followed; and Tressa, buried in furs, looked out upon a dazzling, unblemished world, lying silvery white under a sky as azure as her eyes.

"Keuke Mongol—Heavenly Azure," he whispered close to her crimsoned cheek, "do you know how I have loved you—always—always?"

"No, I did not know that," she said.

"Nor I, in the beginning. Yet it happened, also, from the beginning when I first saw you."

"That is a delicious thing to be told. Within me a most heavenly glow is spreading. . . . Unglove your hand."

She slipped the glove from her own white fingers and felt for his under the furs.

"Aie," she sighed, "you are more beautiful than Ali; more wonderful than the Flaming Pearl. Out of ice and fire a new world has been made for us."

"Heavenly Azure—my darling!"

"Oh-h," she sighed, "your words are sweeter than the breeze in Yian! I shall be a bride to you such as there never has been since the days of the Blessed

Companions—may their names be perfumed and sweet-scented! . . . Shall I truly be one with you, my lord?"

"Mind, soul, and body, one being, you and I, little Heavenly Azure."

"Between your two hands you hold me like a burning rose, my lord."

"Your sweetness and fire penetrate my soul."

"We shall burn together then till the sky-carpet be rolled up. Kosh! We shall be one, and on that day I shall not be afraid."

The sleigh came to a clashing, jingling halt; the train plowed into the depot buried in vast clouds of snowy steam.

But when they had taken the places reserved for them, and the train was moving swifter and more swiftly toward New York, fear suddenly overwhelmed Victor Cleves, and his face grew grey with the menacing tumult of his thoughts.

The girl seemed to comprehend him, too, and her own features became still and serious as she leaned forward in her chair.

"It is in God's hands, Heart of the World," she said in a low voice. "We are one, thou and I,—or nearly so. Nothing can harm my soul."

"No. . . . But the danger—to your life——"

"I fear no Yezidee."

"The beast will surely try to kill you. And what can I do? You say my pistol is useless."

"Yes. . . . But I want you near me."

"Do you imagine I'd leave you for a second?

Good God," he added in a strangled voice, "isn't there any way I can kill this wild beast? With my naked hands——?"

"You must leave him to me, Victor."

"And you believe you can slay him? *Do* you?"

She remained silent for a long while, bent forward in her armchair, and her hands clasped tightly on her knees.

"My husband," she said at last, "what your astronomers have but just begun to suspect is true, and has long, long been known to the Sheiks-el-Djebel.

"For, near to this world we live in, are other worlds—planets that do not reflect light. And there is a dark world called Yrimid, close to the earth—a planet wrapped in darkness—a black star. . . . And upon it Erlik dwells. . . . And it is peopled by demons. . . . And from it comes sickness and evil——"

She moistened her lips; sat for a while gazing vaguely straight before her.

"From this black planet comes all evil upon earth," she resumed in a hushed voice. "For it is very near to the earth. It is not a hundred miles away. All strange phenomena for which our scientists can not account are due to this invisible planet,—all new and sudden pestilences; all convulsions of nature; the newly noticed radio disturbances; the new, so-called inter-planetary signals—all—all have their hidden causes within that black and demon-haunted planet long known to the Yezidees, and by them called Yrimid, or Erlik's World.

"And—it is to this black planet that I shall send Sanang, Slayer of Souls. I shall tear him from this earth, though he cling to it with every claw; and I shall fling his soul into darkness—out across the gulf—drive his soul forth—hurl it toward Erlik like a swift rocket charred and falling from the sky into endless night.

"So shall I strive to deal with Prince Sanang, Sorcerer of Mount Alamout, the last of the Assassins, Sheik-el-Djebel, and Slayer of Souls. . . . May God remember him in hell."

Already their train was rolling into the great terminal.

Recklow was awaiting them. He took Tressa's hands in his and gazed earnestly into her face.

"Have you come to show us how to conclude this murderous business?" he asked grimly.

"I shall try," she said calmly. "Where have you cornered Sanang?"

"Could you and Victor come at once?"

"Yes." She turned and looked at her husband, who had become quite pale.

Recklow saw the look they exchanged. There could be no misunderstanding what had happened to these two. Their tragedy had ended. They were united at last. He understood it instantly,—realised how terrible was this new and tragic situation for them both.

Yet, he knew also that the salvation of civilisation itself now depended upon this girl. She must face Sanang. There was nothing else possible.

"The streets are choked with snow," he said, "but I have a coupé and two strong horses waiting."

He nodded to one of his men standing near. Cleves gave him the hand luggage and checks.

"All right," he said in a low voice to Recklow; and passed one arm through Tressa's.

The coupé was waiting on Forty-second Street, guarded by a policeman. When they had entered and were seated, two mounted policemen rode ahead of the lurching vehicle, picking a way amid the monstrous snow-drifts, and headed for the East River.

"We've got him somewhere in a wretched row of empty houses not far from East River Park. I'm taking you there. I've drawn a cordon of my men around the entire block. He can't get away. But I dared take no chances with this Yezidee sorcerer—dared not let one of my men go in to look for him—go anywhere near him,—until I could lay the situation before you, Mrs. Cleves."

"Yes," she said calmly, "it was the only way, Mr. Recklow. There would have been no use shooting him—no use taking him prisoner. A prisoner, he remains as deadly as ever; dead, his mind still lives and breeds evil. You are quite right; it is for me to deal with Sanang."

Recklow shuddered in spite of himself. "Can you tear his claws from the vitals of the world, and free the sick brains of a million people from the slavery of this monster's mind?"

The girl said seriously:

"Even Satan was stoned. It is so written. And was cast out. And dwells forever and ever in Abaddon. No star lights that Pit. None lights the Black Planet, Yrimid. It is where evil dwells. And there Sanang Noïane belongs."

And now, beyond the dirty edges of the snow-smothered city, under an icy mist they caught sight of the river where ships lay blockaded by frozen floes.

Gulls circled over it; ghostly factory chimneys on the further shore loomed up gigantic, ranged like minarettes.

The coupé, jolting along behind the mounted policemen, struggled up toward the sidewalk and stopped. The two horses stood steaming, knee deep in snow. Recklow sprang out; Tressa gave him one hand and stepped lithely to the sidewalk. Then Cleves got out and came and took hold of his wife's arm again.

"Well," he said harshly to Recklow, "where is this damned Yezidee hidden?"

Recklow pointed in silence, but he and Tressa had already lifted their gaze to the stark, shabby row of abandoned three-story houses where every dirty blind was closed.

"They're to be demolished and model tenements built," he said briefly.

A man muffled in a fur overcoat came up and took Tressa's hand and kissed it.

She smiled palely at Benton, spoke of Yulun, wished him happiness. While she was yet speaking Selden approached and bent over her gloved hand. She spoke to him very sweetly of Sansa, expressing pleasure at the prospect of seeing her again in the body.

"The Seldens and ourselves have adjoining apartments at the Ritz," said Benton. "We have reserved a third suite for you and Victor."

She inclined her lovely head, gravely, then turned to Recklow, saying that she was ready.

"It makes no difference which front door I unlock," he said. "All these tenements are connected by human rat-holes and hidden runways leading from one house to another. . . . How many men do you want?"

"I want you four men,—nobody else."

Recklow led the way up a snow-covered stoop, drew a key from his pocket, fitted it, and pulled open the door.

A musty chill struck their faces as they entered the darkened and empty hallway. Involuntarily every man drew his pistol.

"I must ask you to do exactly what I tell you to do," she said calmly.

"Certainly," said Recklow, caressing his white moustache and striving to pierce the gloom with his keen eyes.

Then Tressa took her husband's hand. "Come," she said. They mounted the stairway together; and the three others followed with pistols lifted.

There was a vague grey light on the second floor; the broken rear shutters let it in.

As though she seemed to know her way, the girl led them forward, opened a door in the wall, and disclosed a bare, dusty room in the next house.

Through this she stepped; the others crept after her with weapons ready. She opened a second door, turned to the four men.

"Wait here for me. Come only when I call," she whispered.

"For God's sake take me with you," burst out Cleves.

"In God's name stay where you are till you hear me call your name!" she said almost breathlessly.

Then, suddenly she turned, swiftly retracing her steps; and they saw her pass through the first door and disappear into the first house they had entered.

A terrible silence fell among them. The sound of her steps on the bare boards had died away. There was not a sound in the chilly dusk.

Minute after minute dragged by. One by one the men peered fearfully at Cleves. His visage was ghastly and they could see his pistol-hand trembling.

Twice Recklow looked at his wrist watch. The third time he said, unsteadily: "She has been gone three-quarters of an hour."

Then, far away, they heard a heavy tread on the stairs. Nearer and nearer came the footsteps.

Every pistol was levelled at the first door as a man's bulky form darkened it.

"It's one of my men," said Recklow in a voice like a low groan. "Where on earth is Mrs. Cleves?"

"I came to tell you," said the agent, "Mrs. Cleves came out of the first house nearly an hour ago. She got into the coupé and told the driver to go to the Ritz."

"What!" gasped Recklow.

"She's gone to the Ritz," repeated the agent. "No one else has come out. And I began to worry—hearing nothing of you, Mr. Recklow. So I stepped in to see——"

"You say that Mrs. Cleves went out of the house we entered, got into the coupé, and told the driver to go to the Ritz?" demanded Cleves, astounded.

"Yes, sir."

"Where is that coupé? Did it return?"

"It had not returned when I came in here."

"Go back and look for it. Look in the other street," said Recklow sharply.

The agent hurried away over the creaking boards. The four men gazed at one another.

"The thing to do is to obey her and stay where we are," said Recklow grimly. "Who knows what peril we may cause her if we move from——"

His words froze on his lips as Tressa's voice rang out from the darkness beyond the door they were guarding:

"Victor! I—I need you! Come to me, my husband!"

As Cleves sprang through the door into the darkness beyond, Benton smashed a window sash with all the force of his shoulder, and, reaching out through the shattered glass, tore the rotting blinds from their hinges, letting in a flood of sickly light.

Against the bare wall stood Tressa, both arms extended, her hands flat against the plaster, and each hand transfixed and pinned to the wall by a knife.

A white sheet lay at her feet. On it rested a third knife. And, bending on one knee to pick it up, they caught a glimpse of a slender young man in fashionable afternoon attire, who, as they entered with the crash of the shattered window in their ears, sprang to his nimble feet and stood confronting them, knife in hand.

Instantly every man fired at him and the bullets whipped the plaster to a smoke behind him, but the slender, dark skinned young man stood motionless, looking at them out of brilliant eyes that slanted a trifle.

Again the racket of the fusillade swept him and filled the room with plaster dust.

Cleves, frantic with horror, laid hold of the knives that pinned his wife's hands to the wall, and dragged them out.

But there was no blood, no wound to be seen on her soft palms. She took the murderous looking blades from him, threw one terrible look at Sanang, kicked the shroud across the floor toward him, and flung both knives upon it.

The place was still dim with plaster dust and pistol fumes as she stepped forward through the acrid mist, motioning the four men aside.

"Sanang!" she cried in a clear voice, "may God remember you in hell, for my feet have spurned your shroud, and your knives, which could not scar my palms, shall never pierce my heart! Look out for yourself, Prince Sanang!"

"Tokhta!" he said, calmly. "My soul be ransom for yours!"

"That is a lie! My soul is already ransomed! My mind is the more powerful. It has already halted yours. It is conquering yours. It is seizing your mind and enslaving it. It is mastering your will, Sanang! Your mind bends before mine. You know it! You know it is bending. You feel it is breaking down!"

Sanang's eyes began to glitter but his pale brown face had grown almost white.

"I slew you once—in the Wood of the White Moth," he said huskily. "There is no resurrection from such a death, little Heavenly Azure. Look upon me! My soul and yours are one!"

"You are looking upon my soul," she said.

"A lie! You are in your body!"

The girl laughed. "My body lies asleep in the Ritz upon my husband's bed," she said. "My body is his, my mind belongs to him, my soul is already one with his. Do you not know it, dog of a Yezidee? Look upon me, Sanang Noïane! Look upon my unwounded hands! My shroud lies at your feet. And there lie the knives that could not pierce my heart!

I am thrice clean! Listen to my words, Sanang! There is no other god but God!"

The young man's visage grew pasty and loose and horrible; his lips became flaccid like dewlaps; but out of these sagging folds of livid skin his voice burst whistling, screaming, as though wrenched from his very belly:

"May Erlik strangle you! May you rot where you stand! May your face become a writhing mass of maggots and your body a corruption of living worms!

"For what you are doing to me this day may every demon in hell torment you!

"Have a care what you are about!" he screeched. "You are slaying my mind, you sorceress! You have seized my mind and are crushing it! You are putting out its light, you Yezidee witch!—you are quenching the last spark—of reason—in—me——"

"Sanang!"

His knife fell clattering to the floor. But he stood stock still, his hands clutching his head—stood motionless, while scream on scream tore through the loose and gaping lips, blowing them into ghastly, distorted folds.

"Sanang Noïane!" she cried in her clear voice, "the Eight Towers are darkened! The Rampart of Gog and Magog is fallen! On Mount Alamout nothing is living. The minds of mankind are free again!"

She stepped forward, slowly, and stood near him, chanting in a low voice the Prayers for the Dead.

She bent down and unrolled the shroud, laid it on his shoulders and drew it up and across his face, covering his dying eyes, and swathed him so, slowly, from head to foot.

Then she gathered up the three knives, cast them upward into the air. They did not fall again. They disappeared. And all the while, under her breath, the girl was chanting the Prayers for the Dead as she moved silently about her business.

Shrouded to the forehead in its white cerements, the muffled figure of Sanang stood upright, motionless as a swathed and frozen corpse.

Outside, the daylight had become greyer. It had begun to snow again, and a few flakes blew in through the shattered windows and clung to the winding sheet of Sanang.

And now Tressa drew close to the shrouded shape and stood before it, gazing intently upon the outlined features of the last of the Yezidees.

"Sanang," she said very softly, "I hear your soul bidding your body farewell. Tokhta!"

Then, under the strained gaze of the four men gathered there, the shroud fell to the floor in a loose heap of white folds. There was nobody under it; no trace of Sanang. The human shape of the Yezidee had disappeared; but a greyish mist had filled the room, wavering up like smoke from the shroud, and, like smoke, blowing in a long streamer toward the window where the draught drew it out through the falling snow and scattered the last shred of it against the greying sky.

In the room the mist thinned swiftly; the four men could now see one another. But Tressa was no longer in the room. And in place of the white shroud a piece of filthy tattered carpet lay on the floor. And a dead rat, flattened out, dry and dusty, lay upon it.

"For God's sake," whispered Recklow hoarsely, "let us get out of this!"

Cleves, his pistol clutched convulsively, stared at him in terror. But Recklow took him by the arm and drew him away, muttering that Tressa was waiting for him, and might be ill, and that there was nothing further to expect in this ghastly spot.

They went with Cleves to the Ritz. At the desk the clerk said that Mrs. Cleves had the keys and was in her apartment.

The three men entered the corridor with him; watched him try the door; saw him open it; lingered a moment after it had closed; heard the key turn.

At the sound of the door closing the maid came.

"Madame is asleep in her room," she whispered.

"When did she come in?"

"More than two hours ago, sir. I have drawn her bath, but when I opened the door a few moments ago, Madame was still asleep."

He nodded; he was trembling when he put off his overcoat and dropped hat and gloves on the carpet.

From the little rose and ivory reception room he could see the closed door of his wife's chamber. And for a while he stood staring at it.

Then, slowly, he crossed this room, opened the door; entered.

In her bedroom the tinted twilight was like ashes of roses. He went to the bed and looked down at her shadowy face; gazed intently; listened; then, in sudden terror, bent and laid his hand on her heart. It was beating as tranquilly as a child's; but as she stirred, turned her head, and unclosed her eyes, under his hand her heart leaped like a wild thing caught unawares and the snowy skin glowed with an exquisite and deepening tint as she lifted her arms and clasped them around her husband's neck, drawing his quivering face against her own.

THE END